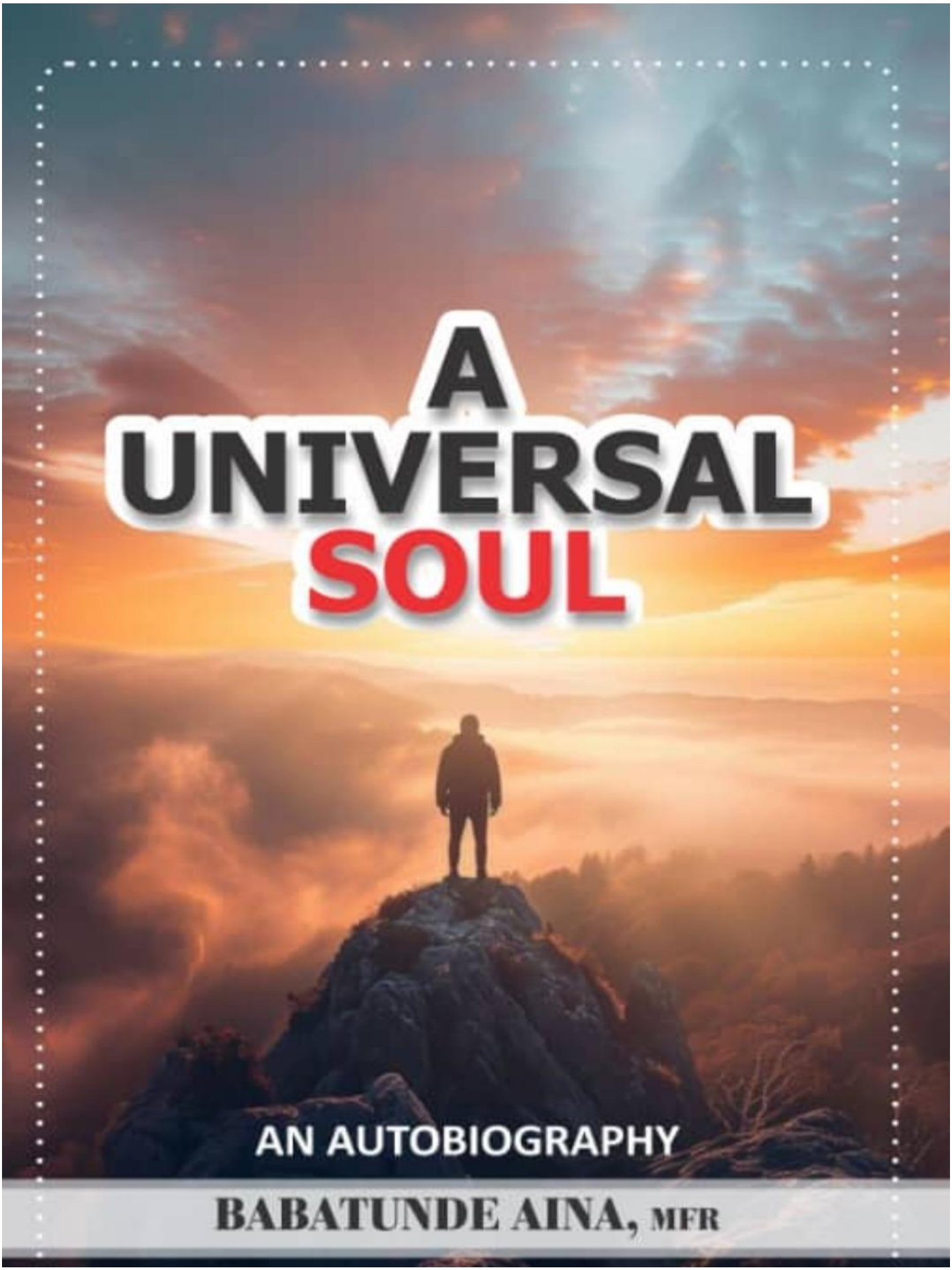
A
UNIVERSAL
SOUL
AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY
BABATUNDE AINA, MFR

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"The privilege of a lifetime is to become who you truly are." Carl Jung

Foreword for "A Universal Soul"

It is both an honour and a genuine pleasure to introduce this remarkable autobiography, *A Universal Soul*. I had the privilege of teaching many bright minds throughout my academic career, and Babatunde stands out not only for his keen intellect but for his profound and relentless curiosity — a trait that defines the very journey captured in these pages.

When Babatunde approached me to write this foreword, he described a book that is more than a memoir; it is a map of a quest. Having now read it, I can confirm it is exactly that. *A Universal Soul* is the compelling story of one man's courageous pursuit of truth, a journey that began in the devout confines of the Christ Apostolic Church and ventured far beyond its walls.

This book vividly recounts the early disillusionment with inherited doctrines that sparked a lifelong search for meaning. Babatunde guides the reader through his intellectual and spiritual odyssey — a sincere exploration of world religions, philosophies, and teachings that ultimately molded him. What makes his journey so gripping are not just the conclusions he reaches, but the very human cost of his quest. The book does not shy away from the serious familial and communal conflicts that his departure from the church engendered, offering a powerful, personal testament to the difficulty of choosing principle over tradition.

Yet, this is not solely a spiritual narrative. Babatunde is, at his core, a science enthusiast and an advocate for evidence-based reasoning. This rationalist lens brings a unique clarity and discipline to his reflections, allowing him to dissect complex worldviews with analytical precision. His advocacy for healthy living is presented not as a mere hobby, but as an integral part of his philosophy — a commitment to nurturing the vessel that carries the mind and soul.

This intellectual and spiritual rigor is mirrored by his distinguished professional life. His successful career in the Nigerian public service, crowned with a National Honours Award (MFR), stands as a testament to the same integrity and dedication he applied to his personal quest. It proves that a life examined internally can also excel externally in service to one's nation.

Perhaps most surprisingly, for a work of such depth, *A Universal Soul* is a truly engaging read. Babatunde has masterfully written his life story with the narrative flair of a novel. The result is a book that is as difficult to put down as it is to forget — a rare feat for an autobiography.

I commend Babatunde Aina for his honesty, his courage, and his unwavering commitment to sharing his universal story. This book is more than a personal history; it is an invitation to readers everywhere to question, to seek, and to think deeply about their own place in the world. It is a story for anyone who has ever wondered if there is another path, and had the bravery to look for one.

It is a story, I believe, for all of us.

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Preface

This is the story of my life. It opens with anecdotal narration of events prior to my birth, in Mushin (a Lagos suburb), threads through important epochs of my journey on earth – school, friendship, love, work, recreation, marriage, family and career – and closes with what may be best described as my philosophy of life. I have devoted four chapters – five, nine, ten and sixteen – to my quest for meaning/purpose of life and my forays into various religions, culminating in my eventual rejection of theism. I cannot complete this autobiography without weaving in my fascination for science, which chapter seventeen delves into, while the nineteenth chapter presents my little but consequential attempt at capturing my advocacy regarding healthy living.

It is important to note that while the conversations embedded in the various plots may not be the exact words spoken, they are contextual representations of the actual messages and intent of the respective speakers.

~ Tunde Aina (2025).

Dedication

To my awesome wife, Helen (Olomi), and my wonderful daughters: Ayomitide (Darling) and Moteniola (Sweetie). Together, they make the word "miracle" take on form in my life.

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PROLOGUE: MEET MY PARENTS

"The lion and the lamb shall lie down together – but the lamb won't get much sleep." ~ Woody Allen

She trudged on, tired but determined to get to the stall of the *eleweomo* painstakingly described by *Mama*. Thinking about Mama's illness alone was enough to renew her strength for the search to get the *agbo* needed to get Mama back to good health.

"Please Sir, do you know the stall of Baba Nureni?" She asked an elderly stranger decked in a black apparel.

"You're almost there, my daughter. Three stalls, turn right… then two stalls to your left… Make haste. Baba was preparing to close when I left him a while ago."

She offered profuse thanks and moved on… but then, she heard the voice of the stranger calling her back.

"Arabirin! (meaning young woman). Don't worry, all will be well with your mother-in-law. I know you love her. She's not about to depart the world yet…. You're pregnant. Hope you know?"

She starred at the stranger in black, dumbfounded. Her mind was in a turmoil. Who told this total stranger that I'm here for my mother-in-law? How did he know about my pregnancy, which is yet to show? Is he a prophet? Does he see things?

Her reverie was interrupted by the stranger, "You will deliver a baby girl in due time. She'll receive a special anointment from Jehovah. She'll be close to your mother-in-law, who will teach her the way of the Lord. I assure you the seed in your womb will become a woman of God… Take care that you do not give her anything hot to eat; her food must always be warm, never hot!"

She was about to ask further questions, when the stranger interrupted her again.

"Hurry now, *Baba Nureni* is about to close."

With that, the stranger moved on swiftly, leaving the weary woman stupefied.

The Judge of the Mushin District Magistrate Court seemed to be in a hurry, as he entered the courtroom that day in early December, 1965.

"Clerk, call the first case!" He bellowed.

The Court Clerk, unruffled, got up, adjusted his tie, pulled his belt higher up over his tummy, and cleared his throat. "The first case before this Honourable Court today is Case No. MDC/MC 2/435, which is the case of the District Police Vs Mr Eyinlafe. Mr Eyinlafe has been accused of stealing a hen belonging to his neighbour, Madame Falodun..."

The case dragged on for hours before the tired-looking Judge postponed judgement delivery till the following week.

"C--O--U--R--T!!!" thundered the Court Clerk, who was already feeling excited that his favourite meal, *Ikokore elemimeje*, would be awaiting him on returning home after the day's work. Thirty minutes later, he was seen walking majestically to his proud bicycle.

The Lord is good! He smiled, but his smile slipped as he remembered his loving mother, who had been seriously ill. He felt pity for his pregnant wife who, despite nurturing a year-and-a-half old son, was home alone to take care of Mama, do all the household chores and still cook *Ikokore* before his return. He wondered why Jane had to return to school at this critical time that she was most needed. Maybe there'll be no *Ikokore* waiting today! He sighed, as he rode quickly through the Post Office Road, on his now suddenly weary way, to 113, Agege Motor Road, Babaolosha, Mushin.

Ten minutes later, the Court Clerk packed his bicycle neatly under a tree, affront an imposing colonial-era building, where he had one room for his mother, and another one he shared with his pregnant, nursing wife.

"*E ku ile o!*"

No response!

"*E ku ile o!*"

The silence that greeted him was palpable.

Where is everybody?

He turned the handle of his room door. Locked! He moved on to Mama's room. He tried the door which opened with a creaking sound.

"Maami!"

He heard his mother's faint response: "*Daani! Oko mi. Kaabo o.*"

"Has Funmi not returned from the market?"

"She has returned (cough)… the kerosene finished while she was cooking at the backyard. She's gone to look for kerosene at *Kelani*. I only pray she gets… (cough) you know that commodity is very scarce these days, and she's yet to finish the *agbo iba* that she was cooking for me."

"What of Leke?" He enquired after his son.

Mama responded weakly, "Funmi backed Leke and went out with him. You know, she insisted the boy would be too much for me to handle, considering my ill-health... You have a most beautiful and wonderful wife. Ever so considerate, ever so self-sacrificing. God bless her soul!"

Two months passed.

It had been a tough day at the Courthouse that morning. A bricklayer, who had been sentenced to jail for arson committed over the infidelity of his wife, suddenly went berserk, jumped over the clerk's table and attacked the judge. All hell broke loose as the police officers attached to the court struggled to get the convict's hands off the judge's throat!

After the mayhem and on completion of his other office chores, the Clerk rode somberly home, hoping for a well-deserved rest. As he struggled to open his door, he saw his now heavily pregnant wife coming up to him, panting.

"You went out again? Do you want to deliver my baby on the road or something?" he asked disapprovingly.

"Don't be annoyed, *Oko mi*. When I went to fetch water this morning, I saw something really beautiful that Mama Risi had just made. I couldn't resist going back to buy these for our coming baby girl." Funmi enthused, displaying two new gowns she'd just bought.

"Gowns again? You keep buying only female baby things, especially *kaba*. What made you so sure that it'll be a girl? Don't tell me you believe the words of that charlatan you met at Ojuwoye Market!

"He's a man of God. He knows things. I believe him o. You know we now need a girl, after having two boys?" Funmi's tone was conciliatory.

"Stop counting Olumide who had passed on to the great beyond. We have only one son now. A girl will be fine, but it's also ok if it turns out to be another boy… Please bring my food. I'm starving."

As Funmi stooped beside the table to serve her husband's meal, she bent over in agonising pain. Her husband sprang up. All his hunger pangs disappeared as he realised that his wife's labour pains had set in.

Twenty minutes later, he was seen holding Funmi's waist, as he supported her into Layembi Maternity Home.

It was Friday, February 18 1966.

Seven days later, Pastor Adejumobi, an upcoming Minister from the local assembly of Christ Apostolic Church, Olorunshogo, turned up at 13, Agege Motor Road, Babaolosha – Mushin, to perform a naming ceremony.

He announced, "The name given by the parents to this new bouncing baby boy is: Jacob Babatunde Adeyinka, son of Daniel Adeyemi Aina and Victoria Olufunmilayo Aina. We rejoice with the parents and the entire family on this momentous occasion. May God Almighty count him among us. Amen!"

"Amen!" chorused the crowd of neighbours, family and friends.

CHAPTER 1: TWINKLE TWINKLE LITTLE STARS!

"Innocence is a man's weakness but a child's strength." ~ Anonymous

How Far Back Can You Remember?

I can clearly recall that I was a second year English student at the University of Ife, way back in 1984, when I first mooted the thought. We were at the Amphitheatre of the University waiting for the commencement of a live drama, when I told my childhood friend, Niyi Adewumi, that at some point in the near future, I must put pen to paper and write an autobiography. My friend regarded me and responded that he knew I could do it, but wondered how much of my childhood experiences I'd be able to incorporate. So, he asked, "How far back can you remember?" He then volunteered, "Anyway, Tunde, when the time comes, you can count on me to assist you." I didn't take that lightly, for, Niyi, as a growing child, had a memory that bordered on the prodigious. He had an incredible knack for recollecting people's faces, names, sayings, anecdotes and incidents. What a great offer to have my bosom friend serve as my hippocampus!

The question Niyi posed 40 years ago now looms large. How far back can you remember? Especially now that my hippocampus is no longer available to fulfil that promise. What I had referred to as "near future" has now taken forty years to bring to fruition. Now, I've started. Beginning, so the saying goes, is half-done. So, I guess I'm half-way there now, right? Well, I'll go back – as far back as I can remember.

The first thing I'd like to recollect concerned the Nigerian Civil War …. Well, to be quite honest, I doubt seriously if it could have been my conscious memory at work or a mere recollection of what I was told. Many people started going about with heavy concerns written all over their faces, and discussing in hushed tones as if it had become a crime to speak out loud. The subject of conversation was the war that had broken out in the East. War? What is war? Nobody was prepared to answer silly questions that might be bandied about by a couple of toddlers. As I grew up, however, I came to understand that Nigeria was plunged into a civil war when the Eastern Region, through its declaration of an independent Republic of Biafra, announced a secession from the rest of the country.

I never experienced the First Republic, as I was born barely a month after the first military incursion into the corridors of power, when Major General Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi took over the reins of governance by overthrowing the civilian administration of Prime Minister Tafawa Balewa, in January, 1966. Later in life, my mum told me that, prior to January, 1966, it was unthinkable to see

a uniformed soldier on the street. It became a common sight after the military take-over. The counter coup that followed six months later, which ushered in Colonel Yakubu Gowon as Head of the Nigerian State, created so much bad blood within the ranks of the military that the centre could no longer hold. Subsequent rancorous developments culminated in a civil war that lasted about 30 months, from July 1967 to January, 1970. Now, let me jettison the news and speculations I was told and focus on personal development during my formative years.

My mum had believed she was having a baby girl, remember? She bought only girl's clothes. So, as a baby I was often dressed in gowns (called *kaba* in Yoruba). My popular nickname, in infancy, was "*Emily Onikaba*" (so I was told, not my recollection). Emily was the wife of the Yoruba comedian, Baba Sala, and she always donned *kaba*. That *kaba* was to be my undoing when, one day, tumultuous wind got underneath my *kaba*, and down I went! Now, that is my earliest recollection. I couldn't possibly forget how I went down in a heap. I got up, dusted myself and went home (after crying a little). I was just over two; but alas! The focus had shifted away from me, because my mum had had another baby. Another boy! Welcome to the world, Kemi.

Encounter with Mama

All focus was now on Kemi. Why would my parents suddenly ignore me because of our new baby? Why would "*Emily Onikaba*" suddenly become inconsequential, so to say? Was this what Leke, my older brother, endured on my arrival? *Eleyi o da o!* Not good enough! Physical space was a major constraint, as we – both parents, my two siblings and I - were still living in one room at the same "face-me-I face-You" block of numerous rooms at Babaolosha, Mushin. My grannie, popularly known as *mama onipillow* (pillow seller), had her own room in the same house. The serenity of her room contrasted with the riotous situation in our own room, and I found myself gravitating towards her.

"*Kaabo, Oko mi*" she would welcome me.

"You call my Dad and I the same name, "*Oko mi*". But you know my name is Tunde." I would retort without indignation. She calmly explained to me that "*Oko mi*" was just an endearing name that meant "My husband". My encounter with Mama would then roughly run thus:

"But I'm not your husband." I protested.

"Ok. Sorry, you'll understand when you're older."

"So, where is your husband?"

"My husband is dead."

"Dead? What does that mean?"

"It means my husband has gone to sleep and will not wake up again."

I continued my protestation, "Why can't he wake up? If we pour water on him for sleeping too deeply, wouldn't he wake up?"

Our exchanges would continue until Mama got tired of me.

"Tunde, you will understand all these when you're older and wiser."

"You mean I'm not wise now?"

"Eh, I have some biscuits. Come and have some." Mama's offering of the biscuit bribe would generally end the conversation, at least for that day, only to resurface another day.

Early Religious Education

Following my early engagements with Mama - and always expectant of the biscuit bribe - I generally started paying more regular visits to her shop, which was just in front of the house. Her days of being *Mama Onipillow* had long passed, as she now only sold household provisions and candies. It was in the days when she sold mattresses and pillows that she was able to educate her three surviving children. Her husband had had ten wives, despite being a Pastor and Church founder! My father had an older sister and a younger brother, all of whom Mama single-handedly educated up to Standard 6 in those days. The two boys later went on to secondary school, with my dad finishing from Eko Boys High School, Lagos. Soon, Leke, envious of my biscuits, joined Mama's Fan Club.

Things went well without much incident. Then, one day, Mama stayed late in her shop because a Muslim community celebration kept children coming around for various candies. Suddenly, the shout of "E—C—N!!" rang out from children in the neighbourhood, as darkness descended on us all. It was a power outage, which was quite uncommon at the time. I looked up and noticed, seemingly for the first time, tiny lights that littered the night sky.

Curious as ever, I asked Mama, "What are those lights?"

"Stars" came her reply.

"Stars? What are those, and what are they doing there?"

"Wo, Tunde (not *Oko mi* again) don't disturb me. Let me attend to my customers. Tomorrow, Sunday, come to my room after church service and I'll attend to your enquiries, alright?"

Tomorrow could not come early enough. So, promptly on return from the Sunday morning service, I didn't wait for lunch before rushing to Mama's room.

"Stars!"

Mama smiled and responded, "Yes, stars are some of the wondrous creations of God, our Maker, who created the heavens and the whole world. He also created us, human beings, all the animals, plants, rivers, mountains and all other things, visible or invisible!"

I contemplated Mama's response and asked further, "Where is this God?"

"He lives in Heaven."

"But you said he created heaven. Before creating heaven, where did he live?"

Mama kept quiet for a long time as she considered her response, while I pondered if I had asked another biscuit question.

"God is actually not limited to being in heaven. He is everywhere. He's even here with us now, but we can't see him because he is spirit."

Wow! No biscuit? "What is spirit?" I asked, hopefully.

"Spirit is something that exists but which we cannot see." Mama countered, smiling as if she read what I had in mind. Then she continued, "Now, isn't that your mum's voice I hear calling you? I'm sure it's for lunch. Run along, dear."

"No biscuit?"

"Lunch is what you need right now. No biscuit today. Maybe another day."

The next morning, I overheard Mama telling Dad that it was time he started telling us Bible stories, so that we'll be familiar with the works of God, especially the wondrous miracles he wrought in the lives of the people of Israel. I had heard about God. But "miracles"? What was that? Well, maybe another day. Right now, I'm hungry. I need "bread 'n' butter"!

Family Size Grows

I was just over four now. My next confusion came from my mum. She had recently started working with the Lagos Municipal Transport Service (LMTS) as a ticketing clerk. She returned home one evening, and announced, "I'm very hungry." Alarmed by what I assumed was a white lie, I screamed, staring at her protruding belly, "Mummy, how can you be hungry when you're

already overfed?" Thereafter, everyone in the house burst into uncontrollable laughter.

Mum replied, "I'm not overfed; I'm pregnant."

"Pregnant? What does that mean?"

"It means there is a baby growing in your mother's tummy, and she'll soon put to bed." Dad offered the explanation.

"Another baby? Who is putting babies in my mother's tummy?"

"God create babies and put them there. That's how we were all born." Dad continued.

Confused more than ever, I asked how the baby will come out. There followed the inevitable response: "When you're older, you will understand." I couldn't help wishing the response came from Mama.

As part of preparation for the arrival of the new baby, and with mummy now working, my parents were able to rent an additional room. Thus, we had now upgraded from one room to a "room and parlour" in the same house. Few months later, mother went into labour again, and another boy came along! God had done it again! Welcome to the world, Tosin!

On the Move

On Tosin's arrival, one of my mum's sisters had to join us. She came all the way from Ikenne, Ogun State, to help my mum take care of us. This became absolutely necessary when mother returned to work. My mum was the first from a family of seven siblings (i.e. of the same mother). Mama Sunday, mum's immediate younger sister, had already got married too. Aunt Ayo was next. She offered the much-needed assistance to help four boys navigate the intricacies and dangers of growing up, especially in the absence of dad and mum.

The room and parlour we occupied soon became rather choked. The rooms were two independent rooms, without a link door. We had to move. Our next home turned out to be another room and parlour, but bigger in size (with a connecting door) at House No. 1, Wahabi Street (by the Railway Line), Mushin. The house was a massive, 3-storey "face-me-I-face-you" building, with over 30 different rooms, some of which were room and parlour.

I had mixed feelings about the movement. Grandma did not move with us. It was decided that she should retain her room in the Babaolosha house. After all, we were moving to a house only two miles away. There was no consideration for my free biscuits or candies!

The new house had another drawback, which we didn't realise initially. No water! In dry season, the taps went dry. This meant that we sometimes had to go all the way to Idioro (about a mile from the house) before getting potable water!

Yearning for School

When Leke went off to school in 1970, I felt alone, betrayed. How can my "partner in biscuit extortion" leave me alone? I wasn't even prepared to listen to all "he'll soon be back" explanations offered by everyone around me. "I must go to school too" was all I cared about. No explanation would suffice. I would simply cry and be on the watch-out until my brother returned. Leke exacerbated my yearning for school, for he would return to narrate all the fun stuff they were doing in school, including exciting nursery rhymes. My father's effort to placate me made him enrol me at a neighbourhood preparatory class, where we could learn the Yoruba alphabets known as "A-B-D". Needless to say that I found the "A–Aja", "B-Bata", "D-Doje" learning experience enthralling.

The following session, my father was determined to enrol me in school. So, off we went to the same school as Leke's – Saint Michael Catholic Primary school (Regina Mundi), which was directly opposite the house – you only had to cross the road. My excitement knew no bounds! At the school, I was made to understand that I had to get through a certain ritual prior to enrolment, to wit: my right hand, when stretched over my head, must touch my left ear. No problem. Leke must have gone through this ritual last year, right? Alas! I failed the test and was not admitted to the school. My hand didn't touch my ear as expected. I stretched my hand, even bent my head, to no avail! I had to wait till the following year, 1972! What would I tell those playmates to whom I had boasted I was going to school? I thought the world was coming to an end. I was devastated!! This must be a dream. All I had to do was wake up!

And I did wake-up, after crying myself to sleep later in the day. My dad responded by enrolling me in additional "lesson" to learn "A-B-C" (the English version of "A-B-D"), and get "schooled" in basic numbers and additions. Almost every evening, I would step out and lie down on a mat to watch the stars. It was as if those tiny lights created by God were there to console me. I recalled a nursery rhyme that Leke had started singing all over the house: "Twinkle Twinkle Little Stars; how I wonder what you are..." I felt consoled. I waited. Next year would be mine! Still wondering, I drifted off into sleep, hoping that the stars would come to me in my dream.

CHAPTER 2: BETWEEN STRAIGHT AND CROOKED PARTS

"He who sups with the Devil should have a long spoon." ~ Shakespeare

School at Last!

It's not easy to forget a major disappointment, especially when that disappointment had to do with schooling. Over the next few months, I kept trying to reach out with my right fingers, over my head, to my left ear. Each failure brought sadness in its wake. With each failure, I'd simply take solace in star-watching. I remember feeling baffled and sad on any starless night. Where had the stars gone? I never felt satisfied by the explanations of unclear weather being the reason for the starlessness of the night. I surmised that the little lights of God had been extinguished! That somewhat seemed satisfactory to me – but only temporarily. The nudging question was: who could be powerful enough to extinguish those little lights? Mama was now two miles away. How I missed her!

The day finally arrived when my hand touched my ears! The cloud of sadness lifted. Pure ecstasy followed. St. Michael, here I come! I jubilantly announced to anyone who cared to listen to a six-year old: I can touch my ear now! I'm going to school! My father, after having collected the list of books and other school requirements, took me shopping. He got me a school bag, a pair each of new sandals and canvas, a ball and, most importantly, new books. My excitement knew no bounds.

On D Day, I joined the assembly of pupils in the school. I had no school uniform yet. It didn't matter though, as almost all the new intakes were without uniform. That will definitely come later, I'd been assured. The older pupils recited what I later came to know was "Hail Mary" as part of the morning prayers, during which I was just a spectator. From the Assembly, we marched to our various classes. Mine was Primary 1B, where Mrs Ajanaku, my Class Mistress, was waiting to receive us. During break time, there was an extensive playground to run around on. On that day, I was, perhaps, the most ecstatic pupil in the school.

On Day 2, there was a roll call before the commencement of the lessons of the day.

"Aina Jacob." No answer.

"Aina Jacob."

I still did not respond until a fellow pupil nudged me, "Are you not Aina?" I promptly responded, "I'm Babatunde Aina, not Jacob." I only said "Yes ma" when the teacher patiently explained that my father had registered me as "Aina Jacob", rather than "Aina Babatunde." Back home, I threw so much

tantrum over the name issue that I was only pacified when Dad promised to make the necessary amendment. Thereafter, my registered name became "Aina Jacob Babatunde." That was tolerable, otherwise I couldn't understand why I would be known by one name at home and by another at school.

When the first terminal examination results were released, I took mine home.

"11th position in class?" My father couldn't even hide his disappointment.

"In a class of 35, at least he performed better than 24 others." Mum chipped in.

"Keep out of this", Dad chided, as he stormed out.

I couldn't understand why my dad was angry. I thought I would be celebrated. I kept mute. My struggle for excellent performance in school had just begun.

Meeting Chief Obafemi Awolowo

We had always celebrated Christmas in Lagos. The essence of the festive period - of a virgin birthing a boy child who was raised to be sacrificed to his own heavenly father – meant nothing to me, of course. But the preparation of special rice – Uncle Ben's – and fried chicken stew meant everything. We always had special wears made for us to add colour to the occasion. The Christmas of 1972, however, came with a difference.

"This year," my father announced, "we're all travelling to Ikenne to celebrate Christmas." Splendid! Jubilation rented the air. We had only heard about Ikenne, the serene countryside home of my mum, from Mama Ijebu (my maternal grannie) each time she came on one of her occasional visits to Lagos. From the time of that announcement, sleep became a rare commodity with me. The excitement was too much.

When it was time for the trip, we travelled to Ikenne in a trucklike bus, called "Bolekaja" (literally meaning "Come down and let's fight"), perhaps due to the confined nature of the bus. My heavily pregnant mum felt pretty uncomfortable for most of the trip but she made it. We were all ecstatic, more so when we met our cousins who came from far and near to be part of the celebrations. I experienced many firsts: living without electricity; going to the stream to fetch water, bathe or wash clothes; drinking from an earthenware pot; watching women cooking with firewood; going in search of snails in the forest; eating "ebiripo" (a local delicacy made from water-yam), among many unique experiences of a village life. Some of my cousins seized the opportunity to learn to swim. But me? Forget it, I was too scared of a possible encounter with the mythical Yemoja (mermaid).

The highlight of the celebration was the Christmas Day Service. The All Saints Anglican Church, Ikenne, was filled to the brim. The Supreme Son of the Soil, Chief Obafemi Awolowo - who was the Federal Commissioner for Finance, a former Premier of the Western Region, as well as the First Republic Opposition Leader in the Federal Parliament - graced the occasion. Before the service was over, massive crowd had gathered within and outside the church premises to catch a glimpse of their illustrious son, and possibly touch the hem of his garment. After sharing handshakes and embraces with several people, the Chief suddenly came over to where we, the children, were gathered. We crowded around him. I touched him! It was a wow experience. So, Awolowo was human with flesh and blood, after all! I had thought he was a god among men. Many people in Yoruba land literally worshipped this political colossus. I felt exhilarated.

Shortly after our return to Lagos, my mother went into labour. On her return home, while responding to a neighbour's enquiry on the gender of our new baby, she slumped onto a sofa and groaned in exasperation, "It's a boy again!" Never mind the drama, Kunle, you're welcome to the world!

An Experience in Rascality

I was in Primary 2 when it happened.

"Wait for me." I called out to two of my classmates who were headed towards the Pry 3 Block. "Where are you off to?"

"Going to the bakery for fresh bread," Akeem responded. The bakery was on a street adjacent to the school, and pupils were forbidden from leaving the school premises during school hours.

"How do you hope to get out of the school when both gates are securely locked and well-manned?"

"Don't worry. We have our ways." He paused, then continued, "… but such ways are not for pastors like you."

Feeling taunted, I protested, "Don't you ever call me a pastor again…I'm coming with you." It was a rash decision on my part.

The duo led me to a garbage heap, where, under the cover of the Pry 3 Block, they scaled the high fence with relative ease, and beckoned on me to follow suit. I hesitated but not for long. I climbed the fence. At that point, I heard – or imagined I heard – a voice, "Remember the son of whom you are." Now, I know I didn't imagine it. It was my father's voice. It rang in my ears, loud and clear. It was his admonition to me on gaining admission to St. Michael. My friends saw my hesitation. They saw my doubt. They started laughing. Unable

to stomach their jeers, I braced myself; and, with heart thumping, I hurled myself into the air!

Twamp! My legs went straight into the smelly gutter on the other side of the fence, my hands on the road side. I struggled to climb out of the gutter, with a sharp searing pain in my right knee. Then I saw the blood. My shorts were soaked in a mixture of dark, murky water, smelly algae and fresh blood! A broken bottle in the gutter had sunk into my knee. My friends, or rather classmates (as I couldn't imagine them as friends anymore), burst into a fresh bout of laughter. Could these be the so-called friends I had laboured so hard to bond with? I was on the ground, writhing in pain, and all they could do was laugh? Just then, Mr. Alani, our Handwork teacher, appeared from God-knows-where. "Very good. Come with me, you rascals!" he barked at us.

A cloud of misery hung over our heads, as we were ushered into the Assistant Headmaster (AH)'s office. He was kind enough to send me to the First Aid room, where the medical attendant was able to stop my bleeding. I was given a wrapper to cover my dirty uniform and sent back to the AH. Mr Lawan was waiting. I shivered. Mr Lawan had become notorious for taking pride in giving lashes to errant pupils. He had already given ten lashes of the cane to each of my fellow offenders. Now, it was my turn.

"Remove your wrapper." His voice sounded coarse. I braced myself for the torture.

"Stop!" the AH's voice was angelic. "I think he has already had his own punishment. That's enough injury to teach him a lesson." Inwardly, I giggled. The AH continued, "Aina, tell your father to come and see me tomorrow." My silent giggle ceased. That was a blow much worse than being flogged. My father ke? I am dead!

Dad went to my school, as summoned. I didn't know the details of the gory pictures of my rascality that were painted to him. All I knew was that, thereafter, my father suddenly remembered his own father's calling as a Pastor. He preached to me – or rather, to us, the entire family – everyday. He instituted a daily devotional sermon and prayer, plus compulsory Sunday school classes in church. In addition, he banned us, his sons, from playing football or games on Sundays. Once we had lunch after returning from church service, it would be time for Bible studies and school homework. After all, Sunday was a special day set aside by God as sacred. Who were we, mere mortals, to desecrate it with mundane activities? It was the beginning of puritanism in our home.

Not so Straight a Path

I wish I could say that all my parents' efforts to keep me on the straight path yielded the desired results. Well, it did - for a while. The lure of the street in Mushin was just too much for a seven-year old like me. Another Christmas was coming. The season was usually ushered in early through the display of fireworks and crackers. For children in the neighbourhood, "Bisco" (also known as "Light of God" in popular songs) and "Knockout" were an essential part of the celebration. But money was in short supply. In those days, eating out was common, especially for those of us with working mothers. Food availability was not a problem, as vendors were available at every nook and cranny. My dad or mum would give me no more than "sisi" (6 kobo) per meal, from which I could manage to save only 1 kobo. That was enough to buy Bisco, but not Knockout, which was seen as a preserve of the big boys. And being a "big boy" in the community of neighbourhood boys was important. Very important.

I envied two of the "big boys" – Dele and Rasco. They always seemed to have more money than they needed. Should I approach them for financial assistance? I struggled with the thought. Dele? No way! He was too proud and arrogant. It seemed his father had money. Only wealthy men rode motorcycles in that neighbourhood; and Dele's father had the biggest motorcycle I had ever seen. Moreover, Dele often bullied me, and he seemed to enjoy doing that whenever there were girls, especially Shakirat, around. No, Dele was a no-go-area. But Rasco? He was the cool guy. His father did not own even a bicycle. So, where was he getting all that money he used in buying seemingly endless streams of "knockouts"? I wondered. On occasion, I summoned up courage to ask him to "dash me" a knockout; and surprisingly, he obliged me. The day I decided to "oliver twist" by asking for another "knockout" turned out to be a day I'd like to forget.

"So, you'd rather be a beggar than earn your own money?" Rasco blurted out unexpectedly.

"Earn my own money? How? I'm just a small boy." I retorted.

He regarded me scornfully, "Then run along, small boy. You've got some growing up to do."

"Please help me, if you can. I'm interested. How can I earn my own money?" I said, imploringly.

He looked at me ruefully, then smiled. "Ok. Meet me immediately after dark by the Pool Office."

Feeling triumphant, I went home for dinner. My thoughts centred on how I could win back Shakirat's attention once I had my own money. An air of excitement encompassed our home. Many faces – known and unknown – gathered around Dad in our parlour. In their merriment, none of them gave

me any attention, as I walked past them into the bedroom. Mum was there, chatting excitedly with her sister, Aunt Idowu (who had come as a replacement for Aunt Ayo). What's going on? As if sensing my thoughts, Mum grabbed my hand, literally dragged me downstairs and showed me a new, glittering motorcycle. "See what your dad just bought!" She exclaimed. It was a Honda 125. She continued, "Having completed a Higher Diploma through the Rapid Results College Distance Learning Programme, Daddy now has a new job with much higher pay at the Mushin District Area Council. Better times lie ahead of us, my son."

The excitement didn't stop me from keeping my appointment with Rasco. We met as planned. Thereafter, he led me through a dark alley at the end of the street. He stopped before a huge heap covered with tarpaulin. He looked right, then left, and whispered, "Are you still ready to be a big boy?" Shivering, the words stuck in my throat. I only nodded. Rasco disappeared underneath the tarpaulin but soon reappeared with a nylon bag. From the bag, he handed me four empty beer bottles; and without further ado, we both fled the scene. Few minutes later, I was 12 kobo richer. Rasco's was 30 kobo, having sold the empty bottles to a collector three streets away after the Railway Line. This was theft but I didn't even give it a second thought. All that mattered was that I was on the path to becoming a big boy!

Money Rain

Shortly after I started "earning" my own money, the clouds slowly gathered. When the downpour came, it rained money! At least for public servants. The Udoji Public Service Reforms of 1973 came with greater pay packages, as well as enhanced conditions of service for public servants. To cap it all, the new salaries were paid with appreciable arrears. There was jubilation across the land. After the Civil War, the Nigerian Government revenue received humongous boost during the period referred to as the "oil boom era" of the early 70s. Government, therefore, thought it fair to put smiles on the faces of its workers. The gesture was widely celebrated. Musicians released songs in praise of Udoji, who chaired the Reform Panel that recommended the salary increases. Actors and comedians, like Baba Sala, were not left out, as Udoji became the theme of the moment.

In the home of the Ainas, the Udoji Award excitement was palpable. My dad bought for the house a new stove, a refrigerator and, most importantly, a television set. Yeah, Dad had become a big man now, as, in those days, ownership of a television was regarded as the hallmark of the rich. Prior to that time, only one person in the entire three-storey building possessed a TV – the Landlord. Children, myself included, used to gather outside his window to catch a glimpse of "Baba Sala", a popular comedy programme

and Combat movies. A television! Yes, this must be the big life we had previously only dreamt about, I thought. In addition to all he bought, Dad increased the children's allowance from 6 kobo to 10 kobo per meal. You could almost get money from my dad, just for the asking.

Sequel to the Naira rain, our room and parlour apartment had suddenly become too small. Dad wanted a bigger apartment but mum would not hear of it. She insisted that all the extra money ought to go towards the completion of our own bungalow somewhere in Oshodi. She argued that there was no point postponing the completion of the house, for lack of funds, while living in virtual profligacy. The conflict between my parents over judicious utilisation of the money available dragged on for a while. Eventually, it was fortuitous for the family that Mum prevailed. So, we were destined to leave tenancy behind very soon. We would start living in our own house. How very sweet!

Judgement Day!

My "big boyism" had now entered a new level. Dele was no threat anymore. Rasco and I reigned supreme. Shakirat was swooning all over me. My dad had become a big man who sometimes took us on motorbike rides, especially to church. Life was good, or so I thought. All went well until one day, as I was sauntering back to the house with Rasco, after having made a combined 72 kobo from the sale of empty beer bottles, I noticed that my dad was on the balcony. He had been waiting for us, or rather, for me. I sensed trouble. I turned to go back but it was too late.

"B-a-b-a-t-u-n-d-e!!" Dad shouted, beckoning at me to come up. All doubts were erased from my mind in that instant. TROUBLE (all in caps) stared down at me. I had never seen him look that furious. I started shaking. I turned around. Rasco had vanished into thin air. Which kind of friend simply disappeared when you needed him most? With trembling feet, I wobbled up the staircase. On reaching the top floor, Dad reached out, clasped my hand in an iron grip and dragged me into the parlour. Mum was there, crying like a mother whose child had just died.

As soon as I entered, the whip descended on my head, back, all over me! One… two… three… four… I lost count. Mum staggered into the room, weeping. The nightmare continued. "Big boyism" evaporated. I cried like a baby. I could not even plead for mercy. Who would save me today? Where is Aunt Idowu? Where is Leke? Where are all my brothers? I sprawled on the ground, surrounded only by lava being spewed by the erupting volcano!

"Yuu… yu.. you!" Dad stammered, hysterically. "You have been stealing bottles and selling them! … How could you? How could I birth a thief? … Is that what we've been teaching you? At home? In church? … What were you

doing with that rascal? …. Ma-mai- my own son? A thief? Where did I go wrong?" I was too flummoxed to understand what was going on. How did my parents get to know? No idea. Almost as suddenly as it had started, the eruption stopped. Silence! Then, I heard the unthinkable agonising sound – the sound of weeping! No, not of Mum. Dad dropped the whip. He burst into tears. I started weeping afresh. Mum joined the chorus of tears. After the storm, calmness descended on us like a balm.

CHAPTER 3: BROKOTO TO THE RESCUE

"Childhood is not from birth to a certain age…. Childhood is the kingdom where nobody dies." ~ Edna St. Vincent Millay

A New Horizon

Saturday, April 27 1974. 7 am.

"Have we packed everything?" Dad directed the question at no one in particular.

"Yes, everything." Mum replied as she shepherded all five boys into a waiting pick-up van. She then joined her husband in the front seat of the van.

"Is Aunt Idowu not going to come with us?" asked one of the other boys.

"No. She's preparing to get married. It's Aunt Iyabo that would be joining us soon," Mum assured. Aunt Iyabo was the last of her four sisters. She was followed by two boys: Uncles Wale and Seun. Uncle Seun and I were age mates (as he was just four days older than I), which meant he was younger than Leke. Yet he was our uncle. It sounded anomalous.

The van slowly reversed out of our Wahabi Street premises and headed for the main road. Our sojourn in Mushin had come to an end. The drive to Oshodi was uneventful. Along Agege Motor Road, all the houses rapidly sped past us until, after a few turns, there were no more houses to see. All we saw were long stretches of bush. Are we relocating into the bush? I wondered, as the driver made another turn unto a bumpy, untarred road that led to our new home on a street later named "Arowojobe."

On arrival, Dad led us through an open ground at the end of which stood a solitary bungalow, surrounded by bush. Mixed emotions swirled up within me. How can anyone live in this bush? It was a three-bedroom bungalow, with a big hallway. Dad showed everyone around; and on getting to the last room along the hallway, announced, "This is Mama's room." So, grannie is coming to live with us! My gloom lifted.

The next few weeks kept us all busy setting up the new home. Dad later went school-shopping, and eventually settled for St John's Catholic Primary School, on Oyetayo Palms Street, Oshodi. Leke and I were enrolled immediately, and I was placed in Primary 3A. Kemi joined us two weeks later as a new pupil.

Our excitement became multiplied when Dad bought his first car. It was a fairly-used Volkswagen, jocularly referred to as "beetle" (obviously due to its shape). First, we were no longer tenants. Now we had our own car. Mama felt

relieved. She had been begging her son to do away with the motorcycle, to no avail. Now, the time had come, and life was getting even better.

A New Friend

A month later.

"Where is my money?" I screamed in class, as I frantically emptied my uniform pockets on the desk. No coin! "Where is my 10 kobo?"

There was no teacher in the class. Most of the pupils simply burst into laughter. What's funny in losing the money Mum had given me for school lunch?

"You want to brag that your father is rich, enh? That's why you're announcing to the whole world that you bring 10k to school. Hunger will wire your head today," a boy named Mike, who sat behind me, taunted me. The more he taunted me, the more furious I became. I emptied my bag on my desk, in expectation that the lost coin would suddenly materialise in the bag. I searched through the contents. Nothing. As I rose from my desk, Mike was heading out for the meal break. He stopped, shot out a finger into an opening in my shirt, and sneered in pidgin English, "Son of the rich wey no fit fix a missing button on his shirt no suppose eat." I lost my cool.

"Haaa!" the whole class screamed as I reached out to punch Mike's face. He dodged his head leftward, so I only got him partially. My punch grazed his cheek. He reeled backwards but soon regained his composure. He reared towards me with clenched fists, spoiling for a showdown. Just then, Mr. Ambrose, our Class Teacher, stepped in. Apparently, he had seen the altercation through the window as he approached the class.

"I see. We have a Mohammed Ali Junior in this class. I won't allow you turn my class into a boxing ring. Come with me," said the teacher, his face contorted with anger. And that was how I was marched into the class of the notorious "Flog Master", popularly known as Mr. Brokoto (I believe that to be his nickname, but none of the pupils ever knew his real name).

After collecting six strikes of Brokoto's cane, I was made to apologise to Mike. Thereafter, I was released with a strong admonition to never lift my hands against anybody again, or else, I would be suspended from the school. Surprisingly, I did not cry, neither did I feel remorseful. I felt that Mike deserved what I dished out to him. I was upset that no one thought it fit to admonish Mike or any of my other classmates for their naughty behaviour, after I'd lost my money. Who was to say that one of them had not stolen it? It baffled me that I stood alone in that incident, or so I thought until I returned to my class.

"You can have this." The voice seemed to come to me from afar, despite the fact that the speaker stood right next to me. I looked up from my seat.

Standing before me, a gentle smile on his plump, handsome face, was another new boy in the class.

"I am Niyi Adewumi," he continued as he offered me a 10kobo coin. I turned down his kind offer, but he persisted.

"I saw what happened. Mike can be a real pain, sometimes. Please take this money. I don't need it."

"Why would you not need your money? What are you going to eat? I appreciate your kind gesture; but no, thanks," I retorted, still baffled that anyone would give such an amount of money away to a virtual stranger.

"I have already eaten. I normally bring lunch from home, apart from the money my dad gives me weekly. This is from my pocket money. Please take it. I can't bear to see you go hungry because you lost your money. Besides, you live on Arowojobe Street, don't you?"

"Yes" I nodded. "Why do you ask?"

"I live on the same street. House No. 12. I have seen you a few times along the street. Besides, I think you're courageous and smart. I'd really like us to be friends."

Tears welled up in my eyes. I reached out to give him a hug. We embraced each other. That was how Niyi and I became friends. It was the beginning of a friendship that turned out to be a life-long one.

A Turning Point

Some months later, I was caught dozing during Maths class. Unfortunately for me, the Class Teacher, Mrs Yusuf, probably had a quarrel with her husband that morning before coming to school. She overreacted.

"Aina, you're sleeping in my class." Without waiting for any explanation from me, she continued, "Go and kneel down in front of the class, raise up your hands and close your eyes."

"But I would not see the board with my eyes closed."

"Were you seeing the board before when you were busy sleeping?"

"Excuse me ma, let me explain…" I pleaded but Mrs Yusuf would not listen.

"No excuses. Do as I say," barked the teacher.

I complied without further protest.

Just as Mrs Yusuf was rounding off the class, Mr Brokoto breezed in. On seeing me, he released a wicked smile, like he was delighted to see me being

punished again. He raised his eyebrows and asked, "Mr Boxer, you again? Have you punched your classmate again?" When he was told my offence, he seemed to calm down. He then whispered something to Mrs Yusuf who nodded in agreement. Thereafter, he turned towards me with a gesture that I follow him. My heart sank. Another round of caning? Is sleeping a crime again? I was sorry for myself.

We entered Class 4A. It was break time. Almost all the pupils had gone out for food or to play. The man I had come to fear turned to me.

"So why were you sleeping in class?"

"An all-night party in the neighbourhood disturbed my sleep last night…"

The teacher didn't allow me finish the lie I wanted to tell. He took one look at me before placing his hand on my shoulder.

"You're lying. I know you're lying." He said in a rather mild tone. "Look, tell me the truth."

Apart from his kind gestures, there was something in his eyes that seemed to reassure me that I could trust him. So, I opened up to him. I explained that I found the class very boring. All through the week, we had been doing "Story Problems" which I didn't find problematic at all. They were simply restating simple addition, subtraction or multiplication problems in story form. The teacher kept repeating the lessons because some pupils had problems understanding it. I concluded that I was so bored that I didn't know when I dozed off.

Mr Brokoto assured me that he understood me perfectly. He asked me to tell my parents to enrol me at his "private lessons", where I could be placed a year ahead of my class; so that, that way, I would be able to proceed to secondary school right from Primary 5. That got my attention. Two more years and I could proceed to higher school. The closest high school was Ikeja Grammar School, which was just a stone throw from our house; and already, I used to admire students of the school in their smart white-over-blue uniform. In a little over two years, I could be there! Marvellous thoughts!

Needless to say that I was able to convince my dad to enrol me in the suggested private lesson, but I had to start the following year when I moved to Primary 4 in school. Mr Brokoto took me under his wings, and I soon fell in love with his method of teaching. In half the session, we had completed the entire Pry 4 syllabuses for Maths and English. Through sheer dedication and hardwork, I became exposed to another side of Brokoto. He doubled as my Class Teacher in Pry 5. School work and assignments became "piece of cake"', and coming tops in my class became the norm rather than the exception. By completing three terms' work in two, we completed the syllabuses for Pry 6, well ahead of the time I officially finished Pry 5 in school.

Besides being an excellent teacher, Brokoto provided astute moral guidance, encouragement and advice. He often told us that, "You are destined for greatness, and the only person that can stop you from achieving all you want in life is the person you see each time you look in the mirror: you!" Another of his favourite maxims ran thus: "Anyone who is too quick with his fists will ultimately end up in jail." Another was: "Be good just for being good, not for the sake of reward. Virtue is a reward in itself." It was difficult to determine how or when those subtle messages and advice of his gradually sank into me. But they did, undoubtedly. By the time I completed Pry 5, under the tutelage of Brokoto, my rascality tendencies were gone. I had become a new creature!

My only regret, at least at that time, was that, despite passing the Lagos State Common Entrance Exams in flying colours from Pry 5 and gaining admission to my highly-admired Ikeja Gramms, I did not take up the admission. Dad would not hear of it. I was furious. My fury became aggravated when I later learned that Niyi was proceeding to High School. The thought of having to spend another year in primary school without my best friend became unbearable. I was mad! The world was turning upside down. The days when my hand could not go over my head to touch my ears came rushing back. But this time, there were no stars to console me. The sun did not shine, neither did the moon or stars come out at night. Even nature seemed to be in protest! Why put me in a special lesson to prepare me ahead of my school class? Why allow me dissipate efforts for no reason? In spite of my protestations, Dad remained adamant. Hear him:

"Babatundeous, Baba-agbalagba" (He started as he used to fondly address me whenever I did something he was proud of) "Don't be despondent. I only wanted you to prove your mettle by giving the Common Entrance Exam a shot. I never intended for you to skip Pry 6. I did the same for your brother, Leke, remember? I'm sure you'll perform even better next year. By then you'll be more mature and better prepared."

He paused, probably for a response. When he realised that none was forthcoming, he added for good measure: "Always watch it though, as you're doing well, never let it get into your head. All praises belong to only God who makes all things possible. So, remember to give him the credit at all times."

Those were his final words on the matter. There was nothing I could do. I sulked to no avail.

Celebrations Galore

The gloomy days were soon over, even for me, because at about that time, two joyous events happened to bring back sunshine. First, Dad replaced his Volkswagen with a brand new car: a Mitsubishi Lancer. I felt on top of the

world! If I had thought that my dad had become a big man when he had a beetle, now he must be a super big man for having a brand new car and living in his own house. Second, the celebration became multiplied when the first daughter of the family came along. Shouts of "Won ti bi obirin o!" (meaning: "she has finally had a baby girl!") rented the air when Mum returned from the maternity ward. The naming ceremony was a grand occasion. That was how Lola joined the fold!

Perhaps my parents thought the luck of having the much-desired baby girl would bring another in its wake if they wasted no time in returning to the maternity ward. Their gamble paid off: child number seven soon arrived. It was another girl who came barely 18 months after the first. Now, Lola could have a playmate in her sister. Yetunde had arrived!

Few years later, the main building in our premises was completed. It was a storey building. We now had tenants on the ground floor, while the family moved from the rear bungalow to the 4-bedroom apartment upstairs. Leke and I could now share a room. The celebrations were hardly over when Dad replaced his Mitsubishi Lancer with the newly released, fully air-conditioned Peugeot 504 SR. Things were looking much better, as it had been one celebration after another. It seemed as if it was raining blessings in the house of the Ainas. Glory be to God!

CHAPTER 4: MY HEART ACHES

"Christianity has done a great deal for love by making a sin of it." ~ Anatole France

Mama Bows Out

I must return to an event of great significance that happened about a year before the arrival of Yetunde. It was April, 1978. Mama passed on to the Great Beyond! Without being ill and without warning, she left this world. It was an immensely sad occurrence for everyone around, especially Dad and me. I could not fathom the realisation that I would no longer see Mama. Ohh, Mama who had been my adviser and mentor… Mama, under whose tutelage I learnt many Psalms and Bible verses by rote… Mama, who used to induce me with biscuits and candies to be of good behaviour or be less problematic with probing questions. She slept and didn't wake up on that fateful Sunday morning. She left without saying goodbye. Well, she probably said goodbye to her children, but not to me. What else could be the reason she asked to see all her children two days earlier? Was it to give her final words? According to Mum, Mama ate well the previous night before going to bed. The next morning, she was gone. But gone to where?

It was the first bereavement I personally suffered. My heart ached for days on end. Where had Mama gone? "To the Great Beyond" was my dad's answer. But where was the Great Beyond? What happened there? Could I go there too? Any hope of ever seeing Mama again? These and several other questions bugged my young mind, and I found my parents' answers rather unsatisfactory. One of the pastors who conducted the funeral even made matters worse by claiming he knew Mama was resting in the bosom of the Lord… that she was keeping watch over us… that we should remain in the Lord Jesus if we would like to join Mama in heaven in the afterlife… and that the alternative to going to heaven was to end up in hell fire, a place of eternal sorrow, torture and damnation, for all eternity! His message was, for me, very problematic.

I had read about hell fire in the Bible and heard preachers, including my dad, preach it, but never so graphically. How could God create a place of torment for anyone? I brooded over the explanation later proffered by my Sunday school teacher: "*eternal damnation is punishment for sin.*" I was horror struck.

I couldn't help wondering: could it be justified that a finite man committed finite sin in an insignificant fraction of eternity, and would, thereby, be sentenced to infinite punishment without parole? Granted that punishment was desirable when intended to have deterrent or reformatory effect, but

how could eternal torture reform anybody? It seemed to me that the idea of hell fire, rather than being reformatory punishment, was callous and wicked! Moreover, could any sane mind contemplate, for even a moment, a system of justice that prescribed only capital punishment for all categories of transgression against the law? Would such a system be equitable and just? Thus, if you commit mass murder, you would be hanged; you got beheaded for arson; and for beating traffic light, you would face firing squad! The idea shocked me beyond words. It was ridiculous!

My perturbation notwithstanding, the funeral rites for Mama went as arranged, although I felt amused by the fact that the interment and accompanying wailings were followed by a big party. How did we even manage to achieve that? One moment, almost everyone was in tears; the next moment, it was music and merriment, complete with "*aso ebi*", latest dance steps and "spraying of money"! The musician was praising my dad in poetic tunes known as "oriki" and brand new Naira notes were falling like rain drops. Despite my heart's aches, and not being able to determine whether it was a sane thing to do, I shrugged my shoulders and soon joined the family on stage. I certainly wanted to be "sprayed" money too. Let us embrace the madness together jare!

Time for High School

Having been obliged to go through Pry 6, I thought I might as well make the most of it. I soon threw myself deeply into the school activities, including the extra curricula ones. Thus, in my final year, I played the role of Abdul, the conman in a play titled: "Abdul and the Angel's Coat". Ovations and gifts rained on me from appreciative parents who came to watch our end-of-year drama and whose commendations made me start looking towards the possibility of becoming an actor in future.

"An actor? Forget it" fumed my dad when I dared to air my thoughts aloud to him. "You're going to be a lawyer. We all know you're a talented speaker. You're going to channel that God-given ability towards becoming a lawyer, understand?"

And that was the end of the conversation. I had come to realise that it was fruitless arguing with Dad. Whenever he had made up his mind about something, he always had his way. Cajolery, commands and sheer force were tools he readily deployed to muffle all opposition on any matter. No singular experience demonstrated this fact more than the way he stopped Mum from working. On learning from his wife that one of her bosses was making passes at her at work, the macho husband stormed the office, fuming. I didn't know the details of what transpired in that office. The outcome was not unexpected.

"Don't beg me. You're stopping that work! No man is going to sexually harass my wife. I earn enough to maintain my family. You're stopping that work immediately." Dad announced with a note of manly arrogance and finality. And that was that. Mum dropped out of work to become a full-time housewife.

I eventually completed Pry 6 in flying colours. I had a distinction in the G2 examinations and finished in the top 10 of the Lagos State Common Entrance Exams of 1978, as a result of which I was offered a scholarship by the Nigerian Army, along with two other candidates from my school: Louis Abalu and Bisi Obamodi. Life was good again. Ikeja Gramms took a back seat, and we started celebrating my admission, on scholarship, to Army Secondary School. But again, Dad stepped in:

"You're not going to Army School. No son of mine is going to be a soldier!"

"This is a school admission, Dad, not a military recruitment exercise," I protested.

Expectedly, all protestations came to nought. I ended up taking up the admission offered, yet again, by Ikeja Grammar School. I refused to celebrate though. The sad words of my mum came rushing back at me when I encouraged her to try and keep her job. For days and weeks, she kept wringing her hands and saying helplessly, "No one can stand up to your dad once he's taken a decision." Indeed. I recalled how he had kept his motorbike despite his mother's objection. I didn't mind him hanging on to his motorcycle though. Never mind Mama's "old-school" fear of motorbikes being prone to accidents. I realised that I only objected to Dad's obstinacy whenever his decisions didn't tally with mine. That was the truth. Obstinacy! Maybe I was just a chip of the old block. In that case, one day… just maybe a day would come to turn that table around, and two obstinate egos would clash. I shuddered at the thought.

Voice of God?

My secondary school admission coincided with my movement into the senior class in the Children's Sunday School of Christ Apostolic Church (CAC), Olorunshogo. That meant I had four more years before I could join the adult church: three years in the senior classes and one year of Moral Class. I couldn't wait to be through with the children's classes. They were becoming rather boring for me, partly because my first position in class in the terminal exams was never threatened throughout my stay in the Sunday school. Imagine being bored with finishing first every time! I was in class with the same set of students, with new ones joining only occasionally. I needed new challenges, perhaps even a new church! Dad's scowling face loomed in my memory, and

I promptly kept the thought to myself. Moreover, even Mama, were she still alive, would not take kindly to my contemplation of leaving the church for another.

The thoughts of Mama would usually bring smiles to my face. She was very fond of me. I adored her. A disapproving look from her was often enough to check my excesses. No, she would not want me to leave the church, and it would be difficult to disobey her. I recalled how she told me numerous times that she hoped that I would end up being a pastor like her husband, my grandpa. She always told me how she saw deep resemblance between her late husband and me. My paternal grandpa: I never met him. I couldn't have been named Babatunde if I had; for my name underscored Yoruba people's belief in reincarnation. It was my late grandpa that supposedly returned to the world in me, hence my father's fond way of calling me "Baba agbalagba" (meaning old father). Most of what I knew about grandpa came to me from Mama, who was one of his ten wives!

Despite being a pastor, Grandpa was a polygamist. He even wrote a book in support of polygamy, in which he argued that God actively promoted polygamy in the Bible. He contended that monogamy was a white man's tradition, which, after colonisation, was passed on to us along with Christianity. It was difficult arguing with his position, since all the great men of the Bible were polygamists. One of them, who had 700 wives and 300 concubines, was even reputed to be the wisest man that ever lived. Hmmm, King Solomon, with a harem of a thousand women, some of whom later led to his downfall. Wise man indeed!

Dad fell in love with the thought that I could become a pastor after my grandpa. Pastor? Why not?

"I thought you made it clear that I was going to study Law? Are you changing your mind?" I asked him one day when the issue came up.

"Yes. You can be both. Professionally, you'll be a lawyer, but you'll be a part-time pastor" was Dad's response. "So, after you've graduated from the university and Law School, I'll send you to CAC Seminary. The Church Management would love it. They might even sponsor you." When I didn't utter any response, he continued, "I'm quite sure that God would call you himself before then. Samuel was only twelve when the Lord called him." He paused, then added, "You may as well start listening for the voice of God."

"How do you do that?" I enquired.

Dad smiled. "By keeping silent, especially after praying. The voice of God comes in the still, small voice… that can only be perceived in moments of solitude. Keep studying God's word and keep praying. His voice would come to you."

Hmmm, the still, small voice… in silence. That sounded surreal. So, a human being can hear the voice of God? I would like to hear it. That would be quite interesting. I made a vow to myself that I would do whatever it would take to hear the voice of God. Besides, If God could talk to me, I would be able to ask him my questions directly. If that meant going into pastoral service, even full time, so be it. Aside from reading parts of the Bible as part of daily devotional service at home, I had previously read the Bible in Yoruba. The characters portrayed in the Bible were our models. That was why my father named me after one of the characters: Jacob (a name I later came to detest). Now, I realised that mere reading the Word was far from being enough. I launched into Bible study anew. Starting from Genesis, I read through the entire Bible to Revelation. If I had any questions regarding what I read, I would turn to my Sunday school teachers or Dad. My waning interest in Sunday school was energised afresh.

Everywhere I went, I always had the Bible with me, such that by the time I was in Form 2 in school, almost all my classmates started calling me "Pastor". I didn't mind being called that anymore. In fact, I revelled in it. Any free time would find me at the library, where I fell in love with the Lady Bird's series. But the ultimate read was always the Bible and any other literature associated with it. Besides, I found myself making great efforts at being upright. I started shying away from the company of some of the notorious boys in the school, and even from telling lies – no matter how small it was. No matter what it took, I needed to be fully prepared when the voice of God would come. I saw righteous living as a necessary part of that preparation. After all, didn't the Master himself admonish us that if your eye would cause you to sin, pluck it out? Jesus was right. No sacrifice was too great for the heavenly race. Mine was not just a heavenly race: my new goal was to become a called Minister of the Most High. I had to be ready. No distractions would be tolerated.

The Sunday School Superintendent of CAC Olorunshogo soon noticed my zeal and devotion. He loved it. I told him about my goal. He primed me up by assuring me that I was on the right track. As a Bible devotee himself, he encouraged me to come to him if I needed any clarity concerning the Word of God or the Christian Faith. I felt enthused, as I was already compiling a number of questions that needed some clarification, and I wasn't getting any satisfactory answers from home. From then on, each time Dad stayed back after Sunday Service, to attend YCM or workers' meeting, I would not return home with the rest of the family. I was always with the revered Evangelist Olawepo, expounding the Bible, discussing God's works and miracles, and getting clarity. Now, I was ready. God's voice? I must hear it!

Another Kind of Ache

In my continued preparation for God's calling, everything was going well until war broke out in paradise! I was now over 15. Puberty had set in; and for me, it came with a big struggle. None of my parents prepared any of us, the children, for the challenges of adolescence or the implications of puberty. I started experiencing strange phenomena. I understood the emergence of pubic hair, voice changes and the like. But how do you explain nocturnal emissions; insomnia arising from thoughts of girls; strange sexual attraction to the more tender gender; and strangely still, unwarranted erections? All these happening to a Pastor-to-be? No, these strange sensations must be killed. They were the devices of the devil to derail me from God's Ministry, which had now become my passion, my calling.

The more I tried to suppress the sensations and urges, the more they came. I became deeply interested in a girl in my class, named Kemi. Another in my neighbourhood, Ngozi, always destroyed my concentration anytime she passed on the street or came around to our house. And another one in the Church, Tosin, always smiled at me – a smile that would later haunt me by giving me sleepless nights! What was happening to me? Why the seemingly sudden interest in girls? Why these uncalled-for sexual urges? Was I okay? With no one to discuss my predicament, I turned to God. I prayed and prayed even more. God, please forgive my sinful thoughts. Let this cup pass over me.

The Moral Class in Church offered some reprieve, but only temporarily. It just taught us to resist sexual urges and similar temptations until after marriage. They told us that premarital sex was the great, unforgivable sin capable of blocking the communication channel between God and man. What they failed to tell us was why God gave us such strong, almost irrepressible, urges when we were ill-equipped to handle them. "The urges are from Satan; they're not from God," they said. The same Satan who had the temerity to rebel against God in heaven? Who took a third of the holy angels with him? That must be some adversary! Be they from God or Satan, the urges were incredibly strong, almost overwhelming. They had brought trouble into Paradise; and all I could do was to constantly pray to God for strength to win the war. Why didn't God simply kill Satan? I wondered endlessly.

The Graduation Day was a day of glory, especially for me. It was also the prize-giving day. We were adorned in bright uniforms. The Sunday School Superintendent delivered his annual report, in which he gave me a special mention. He informed the entire congregation that I not only emerged as the best graduating student, I was a most enthusiastic Bible scholar, a brilliant student who would have no problem gaining straight admission into university after secondary school education; and, above all, an anointed Minister-in-the

making. He urged the Church to sponsor me to attend pastoral training at the CAC Seminary. The accolades and applause were so overwhelming, I started shedding tears. Both Dad and Mum stood tall in receiving congratulatory messages after the ceremony was over. It was their day much more than it was mine. Mama would be proud of me in heaven. Life was good again!

Shortly after the ceremony, I was baptised, as part of the ritual that would usher me into the adult church. We were told that the baptism signified that we had died to our old sins; that we had been crucified and resurrected with our personal Saviour, Jesus Christ; that old things had passed away; and that we had become new creatures redeemed by the blood of Jesus. Eventually, we were released into the world as the new Ambassadors of Christ. We were to start living a sinless life. Goose pimples covered me like a blanket. I left the ceremony feeling a burst of "holy energy", filled with renewed strength and determination to conquer all odds. Heaven was my focus; the only *raison d'etre* for our existence. Remember those urges I kept battling against? They didn't go away; they simply receded into the background under the special anointing I now had. Jesus had won. The devil was a liar!

Months passed. My Spirit-filled being notwithstanding, Ngozi remained a constant threat to my sanity, until one day, during my fourth year of High School, without my permission, the bubble simply burst.

"I --- I -- I-- need you," I managed to blurt out to Ngozi when I cornered her at a friend's birthday party. My heartbeats decided to go on a sprint, racing at what must be over 500 beats per minute. "Please be my girlfriend," I pleaded with Her Resplendent Majesty, without quite believing that I had uttered those words.

"But aren't we already friends?" Ngozi sounded confused. Was this a rejection? My heartbeats could have beaten Usain Bolt in the race towards the finish line.

"Yes, but we've never been in a boyfriend-girlfriend relationship. We aren't kids anymore," I declared with renewed hope.

"Let me think about it. I'll give you my answer tomorrow." Her radiant smile gave me hope. Tomorrow… if tomorrow came, I could have the girl of my dream. Ngozi and I would be together tomorrow… and all tomorrows! Tomorrow couldn't come fast enough.

Returning home, I felt a renewed bounce. I hardly slept a wink all night… the show spoiler wouldn't allow me. Hey, Mr Conscience, why are you tormenting me? Can't I enjoy myself just a little bit? The guilt feeling was virulent, bugging me from head to toe. This thing called conscience could be mean; it just went on and on: "You know this could lead you to sexual immorality. Your anointing would be destroyed. God would never call you

again." Was that really my conscience? Or the admonition of the Holy Spirit? In my confusion, I quickly banished the warning pricks. Still, I couldn't sleep. Oh God! Why are you punishing me like this? This was not a cup anymore. It felt like a bucket. Let this bucket pass over me!

And God answered my prayers in the strangest, most unexpected way. His response came only through Ngozi's refusal of my proposal. She pleaded that we were good enough as friends, and I should not spoil our friendship by wanting more than just being friends. My head reeled as if I had just been dealt a sucker punch in a boxing ring. I was so devastated that I felt dizzy. My feet suddenly lost the strength to support me. I bent over to avoid falling down. I probably closed my eyes too. All the stars decided to abandon the sky; else, why were they exploding inside my head? By the time I got myself back, the object of my intense love and desire had evaporated into thin air. Ngozi was gone!

It's difficult to remember how long it took me to get myself together after that devastating experience. Each time any of my parents asked me what was wrong, I just said "Nothing". I assured them I was okay but knew I wasn't. I needed to talk to someone in confidence. But there was no friend close enough to me to share such confidence. At that moment, I remembered my good friend, Niyi. His family had moved out of Arowojobe Street to Pilot Crescent in Surulere. I must visit him over the weekend. I did. His words of strength were like a balm over my wounds: "It's not the end of life," he had said.

Days later, my lamentations were over. This must be the Holy Spirit at work. My rejection was a blessing in disguise, I consoled myself. God had finally answered my prayers by letting the bucket pass over me, or so I thought. Little did I know that after rain, it might not necessarily be sunshine; a hurricane might follow. The bucket passed only to be followed by a drum, and waves. And more waves!

CHAPTER 5: THE GREAT BATTLE WITH DOUBT

"The only appropriate attitude for man to have about the big questions [of life] is not the arrogant certitude that is the hallmark of religion, but doubt. Doubt is humble; and that is the key to true knowledge, considering human history that has been a litany of getting things dead wrong." ~ Bill Maher

Tidings of Eternal Torture

Let me now revisit the doubts concerning some Christian doctrines, which I had been battling with right from the time I lost my grannie. Remember (from Chapter 4) how I felt disturbed by the belief in the existence of hell and wondered how a so-called God of love could allow his supposed children end up in eternal damnation? The questions I raised at that time went into the cooler only to be brought to the front burner, over a year later, by a movie on *Judgement Day* shown to us at a Christian Crusade held in our Oshodi neighbourhood.

The movie opened with a church message on End Time, when Jesus would return to Earth in what was popularly known in Christian circles as "The Second Coming", and how it would be heralded by a blaring of trumpets and rapture of the believers. The preacher stressed the need to accept Jesus as personal Lord and Saviour, in order to qualify for rapture, being the only way to avoid what he termed as "The Great Tribulation". Ultimately, all unbelievers would end up in hell, he concluded. After the service, everyone went about their businesses until the day of rapture. The preacher and his daughter missed it! The movie then showed graphic images of what unbelievers would go through during the Great Tribulation, and how some of them would regret not accepting the vicarious sacrifice of the Redeemer. At that point, there was only one way left for redemption: ultimate death through blunt refusal to submit to the reign of "The Antichrist" and refusal to accept his mark of "666", also known as the "Mark of the Beast".

I returned home totally conflicted by the message of the movie. I turned to my dad, who also watched the movie.

"From the movie, all non-Christians would go to hell, right?"

"That's correct." His answer was swift.

"What about sincere or honest Muslims and traditional religious worshippers?"

"They're all going to hell. They are sincerely mistaken." Dad continued when he noticed that I looked worried, "But you don't have to worry. We're lucky we have the Truth. Hell will not be our portion in Jesus' name."

"But, Dad, what if we're the ones who are sincerely mistaken? What if any of the other religions is the Truth, and we're the ones going to hell for following the wrong religion?" I enquired.

"Stop right there, Tunde. We're the ones who have the True Religion. Too bad for those on the path of falsehood. Enough of your questions. Now, go and sleep. School resumes tomorrow."

That was the end of the conversation. Only for that day. Several similar conversations would follow later. I felt disturbed by his certainty. Isn't that the way every religious person feels certain that their doctrine is true, despite being contradicted by several other doctrines? How was it possible to be assertive or certain about anything, especially in the absence of testable, corroborative evidence? Could we have been mistaken? Even Dad seemed to sense that I was going to open a can of worms, and he probably cringed from the thought of the worms crawling all over him.

Sleepless Nights

Sleep eluded me that night. All night long, I kept rummaging through my mind: other faiths sincerely mistaken? That couldn't possibly be true. If it were true, it would be very unfair on followers of every other religion. After all, like almost everybody else, I was following the religion of my birth. I was a Christian essentially because my parents were Christians who brought me up in that faith, believing it was the Truth. My Muslim friends in school were practising the Islamic religion because they were born into it and raised in that religion, believing that to be the Truth. Was Truth then dependent on the accident of birth? What about our great grandparents who practised African traditional religions of different kinds? Were they all condemned to hell for ever? Being tortured for ever for not accepting Jesus they never knew about? Would that be justice? If it was not fair, as I surmised it wasn't, would God do that? Was he not a God of Justice?

The following weekend, my disquiet over the Christian doctrine persisted. I remembered Evangelist Olawepo. He should be able to give me some clarity and put my doubts to rest. But alas! He doubled down on the Christian doctrine. He referred me to the Biblical story of Paul and Silas in Acts 16, where a jailer asked the ultimate question: what shall I do to be saved? The two Apostles were unanimous in their response (verses 30 – 31): "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, together with members of your family…" When I asked about being responsible, honest, kind, and generous, all of which were virtues anyone could practise irrespective of their religion, the revered Evangelist pointed out another Bible verse to drive home the fact that our virtues were like filthy rags without the redeeming blood of Christ. Virtues or good works were secondary to salvation, he had said; the primary

requirement was a belief in the vicarious sacrifice of Jesus, without which no one could be saved.

That night, insomnia was my companion yet again, as my dissatisfaction with the Christian doctrine of vicarious sacrifice had only just begun. Something in me rebelled, and vehemently so, with the teaching that Jesus came to the world purposely to die for our sins… that he was conceived, raised and killed for that purpose… that the blood he shed on the Cross of Calvary was the primary requirement for the salvation of mankind. I reasoned: If God wanted to forgive us our sins, why didn't he just forgive us? Why would he need the shedding of blood? For me, the central tenet of the Christian dogma was becoming intolerable. For how else could one classify a message that so intolerantly declared, "*He that believeth not shall be damned!*" *Damned for unbelief?* How could anyone sleep with a mind that had accepted the belief in eternal torture? That "…*the smoke of their torment ascendeth up for ever and ever*"?

Another implication dawned on me: if that monstrous doctrine of vicarious sacrifice was true, it meant that Alhaji Jinadu was hell-bound! Alhaji Jinadu, a Muslim, was the philanthropist who single-handedly took over the educational responsibilities of an orphaned classmate of mine, who had dropped out of school. The boy, who was a Christian, had been returned to his village after the death of his parents before the intervention of Alhaji Jinadu. I was acquainted with his well-disciplined children, one of whom was my friend in school. Besides, the man was an extremely considerate, kind and generous person, who always taught us never to cheat anyone. Now, preachers wanted me to believe that such a person would go to hell because of the accident of birth and doctrine? Something was seriously wrong with such a doctrine. It sounded monstrous! It must be a lie! That doctrine must have been fabricated somewhere along the line in the development of the Christian dogma.

Equally disturbing was the fact that, even the seemingly vengeful God of the Old Testament did not have anything to say about eternal damnation or torture; such horrendous thought never entered his mind. He generally just killed his enemies or commanded his so-called chosen people to murder them. Thus, in the Old Testament, no vindictive punishment was reserved beyond the grave. Enter the New Testament and the scenario changed. We have a picture of the Devil and his minions heating up unquenchable hell fire for the coming of the enemies of the All-Merciful God! I thought again: at what point did the infinite love and mercy of God run out? Or, what was the meaning of infinite? And to get his "infinite" mercy, you must believe? Did belief make anything true?

The Alarming Story of Exodus

Many weeks and months passed. My growing discontent knew no reprieve. In my second year at Ikeja Gramms, during Bible Knowledge Class, a student read aloud the story of "Exodus from Egypt". Hear the Bible in Exodus 4:21:

> *And the Lord said to Moses, "When you go back to Egypt, see that you do all those wonders before Pharaoh which I have put in your hand. But **I will harden his heart**, so that he will not let the people go."* [Emphasis mine]

What? That statement hit me like a thunderbolt! How could God harden someone's heart, thereby compelling him to do his bidding, and then turn around to punish the helpless man, his household, his livestock and entire people? I felt disturbed. I felt embarrassed. I was hearing that tragic story for the first time.

The first time? Certainly not! With my Christian upbringing, I had heard about and read that story at least a few times. But how was it that it struck me as if I had never heard it before? Yet again, I resorted to Evangelist Olawepo. His explanation was that God had to punish the Egyptians for enslaving the Israelites who were God's chosen people! His explanation made matters worse and raised even more questions: Why should God have a chosen people? Was he a tribal God? Was he not the Creator of all the peoples and all the races? Was he a partial God? And why kill all the innocent first born sons of the Egyptians? Why kill the livestock? Was he engaged in a power-play with the Pharaoh? And he thought that might was right?

Little did I know this was just the continuation of my being overwhelmed by an avalanche of questions, and more questions that continually gave me sleepless nights, but they were to remain questions without answers. I went back to reading the Bible. Myriads of such unanswered questions assailed my young mind. I began to question very many orthodox beliefs, much to the chagrin of my parents, who could not help me in my quest for more knowledge of truth and life.

Within the following three years, I read the Bible through yet again, with an alert sense of reason, trying to make some sense of the otherwise senseless stories of war, torture, rape, and extermination of whole races; of incest, lies, and betrayal; of massacre of even innocent babies; of atrocities and sacrifices on the blood-dripping altar of the now strange Judeo-Christian God. More questions assailed me:

- From the Creation story, how come God forgot to create the Sun until day four? Such that plants and herbs came before the Sun? What was responsible for photosynthesis? Without the Sun, there was day and night? And how come that God did not know that the moon was not a source of light?
- In the Garden of Eden, why should God have planted the tree bearing forbidden fruit in the midst of the garden? Would any wise parents deliberately place poisonous substances within reach of their children? What would we think of such parents? Why didn't God warn Adam and Eve about the ubiquitous snake? Why should he curse the ground on account of Adam? Why place an eternal curse on the woman? Why didn't he show leniency to our first parents as first offenders? And, worse still, why curse generations yet unborn? Was the act of visiting the iniquity of the father on his children fair? What would we think of a man who did the same? More questions; no answers!
- From Genesis 6, why did God allow his sons to come to seduce daughters of men, such that they bred generations of giants? Why did he have to wipe out the innocent with the guilty in a world-wide flood? Couldn't he determine those guilty? What wrong could children and dimpled babies possibly do? What did the animals do wrong?
- From his relationship with the Jews: How could God love Jacob and hate Esau, even before they were born? Was that not favouritism? Why was he a jealous God? Was he feeling threatened by his creatures and idols? Why be so vindictive and cruel? Why kill his people for desiring a change of food from manna? Why did he encourage slavery and branding of slaves in Exodus 21? Why kill Uzzah for trying to keep the Ark from falling (I Cro. 13:9-10)? Why did he demand human sacrifice in Leviticus 27:28-29? Why did he acquiesce to the sacrifice of Jephthah's only child as burnt offering in Judges 11:30-39?
- During the time of Moses, did God really command: "kill every male among the little ones…keep the young virgins for yourselves" (Numbers 31:17-18)? What manner of tyranny was that? What kind of God would order wholesale massacre of innocent children and whole nations? The greatest acts of genocide were committed by the Israelites supposedly on the commands of this God? Could the Devil do worse than these? Was the Bible describing God or a blood-thirsty Demon?
- During the reign of King David, why should God have spared David's life, after committing adultery (with Uriah's wife) and murder (of Uriah himself)? Why, if he must kill anybody, did he not kill David, the sinner? Why kill David's innocent child? Was that his standard of justice? When

God was angered that David numbered the people of Israel (II Sam. 24), why did he not kill David? Why kill 70,000 innocent men in place of David? He also killed 50,070 people just for looking into the Ark (I Sam.6:19)?

- From the story of Job, why did God continue to relate with Satan familiarly? Why should he condone the killing of Job's ten innocent children, his servants and livestock? So, God admitted that he was moved by Satan against Job even without a cause (Job 2:3)? What wrong did they do? Was it just to win a detestable bet with his arch-rival, Satan? Was that a just reward for Job's righteousness?
- From the New Testament, why should a supposed Almighty be incapable of forgiving sin, unless there was bloodshed? Was he a blood-sucker or a vampire? Why should the altar of this strange God drip with blood of any kind? Why should he send his son to die for the sins of the world? Could the world be civilised by the example of murder and bloodshed? Why should the innocent suffer for the guilty? Would that be justice? Why should any God sentence people to eternal damnation for unbelief? A criminal could believe on his death bed and go to heaven? A righteous person (like Alhaji Makinde) would go to hell for unbelief? Our righteousness is like a filthy rag? A sinner would suffer an eternal, infinite punishment for finite sin? Would that be justice?

My confusion was compounded when, in my third year, I failed Physics in the terminal examinations. I scored a woeful 37% in the paper. It was the first and only subject I ever failed in a school exam. My dad could not contain his rage. He expressed his disappointment in seeing a subject score entered in red ink in my report; and without bothering to ask me what went wrong, he berated me for being too playful. Just at that moment, something seemed to spark in me. I did the unthinkable.

"Leave me alone!" I screamed at Dad. He was too stunned to respond; so, I continued: "Over all these years that I had returned results in flying colours, often coming first in my class, you've always said that I needed not be proud… that the credit and glory belonged only to God. Now that I have failed, the blame is mine? Really? God can take the credit for my success – or anyone else's success at that – but he cannot take the blame for failure? What manner of double standard is that? It's not right!" Thereafter, I stormed out in annoyance.

Although I later apologised to Dad for my outburst, deep within me, I tried to justify my reaction. Come to think of it: Why should we attribute only the good and successes we achieve to God when we can't blame him for our failures? That, to me, amounted to confused thinking. So, this God knew how to take only credits when I passed, but when failure came, I was to shoulder the blame? I wondered. If he deserved all the praises for our triumphs, it would only be fair to hold him accountable for our failures too. Yes, he should have both the credit and the blame, or none! Why should it be otherwise?

For years, these and similar issues assailed my young mind. Day and night, I was more terribly disturbed by the unanswered questions I raised from the Bible. I contemplated them. I prayed. Where was the voice of God I was supposed to hear… the voice I had prepared to hear with every fibre of my being? Why was God silent? There were apparently some serious issues with many Bible stories. Maybe the compilers of the Bible did not do a good job? But the Bible was supposed to be the inspired Word of God… the Holy Book. Could the inspiration of the Bible writers be wrong? Was their sincerity or accuracy ever in doubt? Were other scriptures equally inspired? Would they be at variance with one another if they were inspired? How come that all peoples believed their respective scriptures to be sacred or holy? Holy? Who made that declaration? Were any of the stories contained in the numerous scriptures verified? Or were we to accept them merely on faith? Could any of them be the actual truth? If I wanted to be objective, how would I know which of them, if any, was the Truth? The thoughts kept coming. I talked to other clergymen to no avail.

Over the next decade, right through my undergraduate days, those questions planted the seed of doubt in my mind… doubts about the veracity of the Christian Faith. The worms were out of the can now. They crawled all over the Bible. They crawled everywhere. Would it be possible to can them again? I had my doubts.

CHAPTER 6: THROWN INTO THE WORLD

"Good resolutions are useless attempts to interfere with scientific laws." ~ Oscar Wilde

Entering Great Ife

Remember all the talk I had with my dad about becoming a lawyer and a clergyman? None of that materialised.

By the time the 1983 Joint Matriculation Examination (JME) results for admission into universities were out, my score of 262 was not high enough to secure admission into my preferred course of study: Law at the University of Ife. I was eventually offered a course in English. This was not acceptable to me. I would have loved it if I had been offered Theatre Arts but the decision was vetoed by Dad. Despondency set in again, and my first thoughts were that I'd prefer to proceed to do the A-Levels, preparatory to retaking the JME the following year, but the Lord and Master of the family would not hear of that.

"Do you know how many thousands of candidates seek university admission every year? Only a negligible percentage get admitted each time, and now, you want to toy with yours?"

"I don't care. All I know is that we've agreed I was to study Law. Law it had to be," I replied in response to Dad's pressure.

"Look, my son, there's nothing to worry about. Go ahead with this English course. After your first year, you can always change your programme to Law."

"Really?" My face lit up. "But how?"

"By applying for a change of course after your first year. I'm sure that the Law Faculty would accept you provided you register very good grades in your first year," said Dad reassuringly. "So, you see, the ball is in your court."

After some contemplation, I agreed with Dad. I remembered he was an Alumnus of that same university, having bagged his Post-Graduate Diploma from there. I cheered up. Great Ife, here I come. I went about the rest of my preparation with great enthusiasm, feeling confident that, if it was a matter of getting good grades in my first year, I would clinch the Law programme.

Registration formalities at the University were quite hectic. They were made bearable only by the fun of the orientation programme packaged for new students by the Students Union Government. There were excursions, live dramas, movies and parties – all the stuff that could make life fun for teenagers. I was now a *Jambite* at Great Ife, reputed to be Africa's most beautiful campus. I was extremely proud and joyful. My joy exceeded all

bounds the day I met Niyi at the University. After having attended different secondary schools, we met again at Ife. He had been admitted to read Law, the same course I craved so much. From that time on, once classes were over, we went everywhere together… well, not quite. There was one place he would not come with me.

"How could you go and join the Deeper Life Campus Fellowship? Of all churches, Deeper Life?" Niyi was dumbfounded by my decision to be a member of the Deeper Christian Life Ministry. He probed, "Whatever happened to all those doubts of faith you told me about?"

"Never mind me *jare*. My mind keep doing somersaults over those issues. Sometimes I doubt my doubts and end up getting confused." I answered him with a very melancholic demeanour.

"Well, congrats. It's those of you who take religion very seriously that have the kind of headaches you've given yourself. If you just attend Sunday morning services and stop worrying about the injustices of life, you shouldn't have a problem. But not you, you just have to be *a universal soul*. That is the genesis of your problems."

"Yeah, I guess so. I just thought it wise to give God the benefit of the doubt. Deeper Life might just give me a deeper understanding of God's Word, I hope."

Niyi looked at me and shook his head but he allowed the matter to rest at that.

A Born-Again Sceptic

What I hesitated to tell my friend was that my decision to join Deeper Life was heavily influenced by one of my roommates in Angola Hall – Bro. Michael. He was an elderly man, a devout Christian and member of Deeper Life. I shared my doubts about the Christian Faith with him; and, instead of trying to convince me about the truthfulness of his religion, he admitted he had no answers to my questions. He, nonetheless, assured me that if I remained steadfast in the Faith, God would eventually meet my yearnings, and he alone could convince me of the truth of his word. I envied his equanimity and he won me over to his church easily. His final words haunted me for days on end: "When you have doubts, resolve them in favour of God by trusting in his perfection." Thus, my "questions without answers" and doubts were virtually swept under the carpet, at least for a while.

Towards the end of my first year, I came across an Eckist, Ebenezer Ajayi, who was so sweet-tongued about the teachings of his sect that he raised my curiosity afresh. I was curious enough to want to attend an

introductory talk of Eckankar, the Religion of the Light and Sound of God. But there was a problem: the talk coincided with the weekly Bible Study Hour of Deeper Life. How would I manage it? I resolved to attend the talk. Bro. Michael was disappointed but tried not to show it.

"So, after agreeing to douse your doubts, you want to attend an Eckankar talk? Don't you know that group is a secret cult? Do you want to get mixed up in this and put your relationship with Christ at risk?" He admonished me gently.

To my shame, I allowed Bro. Michael's gentle words sway me. I shunned my curious instinct and attended the Bible Study Hour instead of the Eckankar introductory talk. I had overcome a temptation of the Devil! So I thought. But, as they say: "What's gonna be's gonna be." I wasn't to know that Eckankar talks, seminars, membership, Satsang classes and initiation were waiting for me to be more mature many years down the line.

Later in the year, I even took a step further in my Christian journey: I came out for an Altar Call after an Evangelical Christian Union Crusade. So, I gave my life to Christ, yet again, and received a baptism of the Holy Spirit. However, something was missing. How was it that almost everyone around me could speak in tongues and I couldn't? I complained to the leader who invited me to a Holy Spirit Ministration session. After the session which was supposed to give us the "Apostolic Pentecost Experience", I still could not speak in tongues. Thereafter, I was given a special session by the Minister, just for me. The pressure to speak in tongues was so much that I just blabbed out some gibberish that came to my mouth. Halleluiah! The Holy Spirit had done it again! I was now, not just a Christian, but a Spirit-filled, rapturable one! Glory be to God!

In the academic department, all went very well in my first year. So well that I finished the session with a First Class CGPA. I was ecstatic, having earlier applied for a change of course to Law. The Dean of the Law Faculty was willing to accept me if I was released to him. Released? What was that? He dutifully explained that there was a release clause which must first be endorsed by my Faculty Head. This was a new complication I wasn't prepared for. I approached my Dean with trepidation. His answer turned my world upside down!

"Don't even dare! If I release my First-Class materials, who would be left? Am I the one to keep the dummies?" And with that, he shut the door in my face!

There was a sudden tightening around my chest. What? No Law? "Devastated" could not even begin to describe how I felt. I remembered I hadn't bothered to retake the Joint Matriculation Exam. Would I have to wait till the following year? I remembered two of my course-mates were released

and were able to change to the Law Faculty successfully. What kind of system would allow students with lower academic grades get their wishes by changing successfully, while keeping the First-Class materials in frustration? Oh Jesus! Where art thou? Why don't you just fulfil your promise of second coming now? I need this rapture more than anything else right now!

And that same night, Jesus answered my prayer: the rapture happened! Millions of people all over the world heard the sound of the trumpet, just as the Bible had forewarned. A dazzling angel descended on Angola Hall, dropped a stool and asked us to climb the stool one after the other, so that we could be raptured to meet the Lord in the sky. Great! Just what I had been waiting for. A few people tried and succeeded, many failed. As I approached the high stool, Bro. Michael nudged me aside, claiming seniority in the Christian race. I obliged. He confidently climbed the stool, raised his arms up towards the sky and jumped for rapture. For a moment, he was suspended in the air, as if the Lord was trying to decide his eligibility. Then he floundered and fell with a massive flop! Bro. Michael failed! I was next. I shuddered. All my confidence went on French leave, as I broke out in cold sweat. Then, I opened my eyes. I was on my bed, panting as if I had just completed a 100-metre race. Yes, the rapture happened – but only in my dream!

A Stint of Campus Politics

What was I supposed to do now? I had suddenly lost interest in continuing my course at the University. I didn't bargain to continue in English Department, as I had pinned my hope on being able to change to Law. How ironic that the excellent performance - which I had been assured would be key to a successful change of course – now proved to be the sour point that made the change impossible! I told my parents that I wanted to withdraw from my studies, to retake the JME the following year. But again, Dad would not hear of it. He encouraged me to continue, pointing out that I could always go back to study Law after the completion of my first degree. And that, yet again, was that.

That disappointment soon affected my social life and academic studies. I became bored with Deeper Life. I moved on to become a registered member of the Evangelical Christian Union on the invitation of Dorothy, one charming girl I had been stealing looks at in my class. Things didn't work out well between us, and I left ECU for Rhema Fellowship, a more yuppie group. I freely confess that the main attraction to Rhema was the fact that the fellowship had an incredible array of campus beauties in its fold! However, the official reason I adduced for my joining the group was that one of my closest

friends, Alani Laleye, invited me. In any event, I needed quite some distraction to protect me from going into depression. The distraction soon came in droves.

I became interested in campus politics. So, I started attending the sittings of the Students' Representative Council (SRC), the Parliamentary Arm of the Students Union Government. I was so enthralled by its activities that I contested election into the SRC and won a seat. I also contested and won election as the Secretary General of the Ifevarsity Literary and English Studies Society. That should be enough, right? Wrong, not enough distraction for me yet. I joined the Bang News Agency; and, the following year, became Its Editor-in-Chief, by virtue of which I became an automatic member of the Association of Campus Journalists, and later served as its Public Relations Officer. In that same year, I was appointed the Secretary of the Socio-cultural Affairs Committee of the Students Union; and we organised the best Students Union Week ever, as we succeeded in bringing the rave of the moment, the popular King Sunny Ade, to play on campus.

As a Students' Union activist, I took very active part in almost all the activities of the Union, including students' anti-government protests. Our biggest protest took place during 1985/1986 session. General Muhammadu Buhari, as the Nigerian Head of State, had announced a new Government Policy withdrawing subsidy on students' accommodation and feeding. Students were now to pay ₦90 per session for accommodation on campus (an increase of 100% over the previous charge of ₦45/session!). Prior to that announcement, we used to enjoy rather sumptuous meals for just 50 kobo per meal at any of the cafeteria on campus, but the withdrawal of subsidy soon changed that. Government provision of meals came to an end, and students were now to source their meals from independent food vendors, at an average cost of ₦1.50 per meal. The situation was unbearable for students. Something had to give.

The resultant nationwide protests, organised by the National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS) created so much unrest that something did give: a faction of Armed Forces officers led by the then Chief of Army Staff and member of the Supreme Military Council, Major General Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida, organised a palace coup that overthrew the General Buhari Regime on 27 August 1985! Buhari had earlier, on 31 December 1983, overthrown the democratically-elected government of Alhaji Shehu Aliyu Shagari, in a coup widely welcomed by Nigerians who felt disenchanted by the electoral malpractices that marred the 1983 general elections.

All hopes nursed by students of tertiary institutions for a reversal of the previous regime's obnoxious policy were soon dashed. Government withdrawal of subsidy on students' accommodation and feeding had come to stay! Furlong faces pervaded our campuses. By May 1986, Students Unions started holding nocturnal meetings which culminated in another round of

nationwide protests. The protests later turned quite bloody! When rumours broke that fifteen Ahmadu Bello University students had been killed by the police as a result of the protests, students in my university could not contain their anger. Starting from Monday, May 26, they boycotted classes indefinitely and stormed the Ife Township, blocking the Ilesa-Ife Road, in a largely peaceful protest.

Two Days of Rage!

It was time for the NTA Network News at 9. Students gathered at the various cafeteria and butteries to listen to the news.

NTA Newscaster: "Our correspondent monitoring the students' protests reported that students of the University of Ife did not join the protests, as the University was calm and students were seen going about their normal businesses." The news report went further to show a video (apparently an old one) of a calm university campus, with normal classes going on!

"Na lie! Ife no calm!" students screamed from various TV viewing points, enraged by the NTA false report.

In less than 20 minutes, a large throng of irate students had gathered at the Students Union Building (SUB), bent on displaying their anger to show the nation that Ife had always been the bastion of students' activism and "aluta". The Union officials had a very hectic time convincing the students that it was too late for any riotous protest. Tomorrow was another day.

May 27, 1986.

Shouts of students rang out almost everywhere on campus.

"Ife no calm! Eeh!"

"Solidarity for ever!"

"Aluta continua… Victoria acerta!"

As early as 5.30 am, students had started gathering at the SUB. I saw a dump truck (probably high-jacked from the highway) packed full of female students bent on being part of the protests. An hour later, news (or maybe rumours) broke that Kaduna Polytechnic students had "arrested" two police officers who dared to enter their campus! If Kad Poly students could arrest two, we should arrest ten! After being addressed by very eloquent Union leaders, the march to Ife Town commenced. Shouts of "Ife no calm!", "Solidarity for ever" and "Aluta continua!" rented the air. The only time I had seen such a massive crowd was at a football match involving Enugu Rangers

vs IICC at the National Stadium in Lagos. I felt somewhat alarmed. Mischief was afoot! Fear that the day would not end well tugged at my heart.

We started with the three-kilometre walk to the campus main gate. I went with the crowd, in the midst of my friends: Niyi Adewumi, Alani Laleye, Kola Onifade, Seye Oladejo, David Omorege, Biodun Owonikoko and several others. On reaching the brow of the hill along Road 1, I looked back. All I saw was an ocean of heads and placards: irate students, thousands of us, determined to unleash anti-government venom! How dare they reported that "Ife was calm"?

By 9 am, our students had stormed the central township. People in the town must have got wind of the approaching whirlwind. Markets and banks remained closed. By now, some hoodlums had probably infiltrated the crowd of students, for the mayhem that happened that day was unbelievable: police stations burnt down; fire service vehicles set ablaze; government offices vandalised! Things got out of hand when our students, not satisfied at not having "arrested" any policeman (as they all seemed to have been withdrawn from their stations) headed towards the Divisional Police Headquarters at Moore! Haaa! Alarm bells started ringing in my head. This could turn really bloody, I feared.

12.45 pm. The scenario had changed. I suddenly saw, along Moore Road, a number of very skinny, haggard-looking men heading towards Mayfair, with some of them thanking us profusely with the words, "*Great Ife, e seun o.*" Who were these people? I later gathered that they were prison escapees: the first batch of students at the front of the protest march had got to Moore; but when they were dispersed by police teargas, they proceeded to attack the Ile-Ife medium security prison. They succeeded in breaching the prison walls. All hell broke loose! And, at the end of the mayhem, 218 prisoners escaped!

1.15 pm. As my group approached Lagere Junction, I suddenly noticed that there was pandemonium ahead. Many of our students were running helter skelter. It was a doomsday scenario. Just then, I saw a lorry-load of fully-armed anti-riot policemen - all in battle gear and gas masks - appear ahead. Their approach was slowed down by the numerous burning tyres earlier lit by the rampaging students. Some of them came down from the lorry to clear the rubbles on the road. In a bid to regain momentum, some students tried to attack the policemen. Then it happened. Some of the armed men in the lorry aimed their guns at the approaching students and opened fire! In a jiffy, everywhere scattered and all hell broke loose! I scaled a nearby fence and ran into a house in the neighbourhood. I collided with a woman carrying a crate of eggs into her room. Down, we went: the woman and I, the crate of eggs and a nearby table – all collapsed in a heap on the concrete floor!

"*Yee! gbese!*" screamed the woman, lamenting the debt thereby incurred.

"Mama, please give me cover! The police are after us, Great Ife students; they've just shot and killed about ten of us!"

The woman promptly forgot her loss and started wailing the pains of motherhood, "*Yeepah! Ikunle abiyamo o!*"

I scrambled back to my feet. I reasoned it would be better to return to campus. I re-joined the chaotic scene outside, but soon started feeling itchy, peppery pains in my eyes. Squinting, I could hardly see anything: the atmosphere had become smoky, whitish. Then I realised what was going on: the police were shooting teargas, not bullets, to disperse the students! I heard some students shouting "just douse your faces with kerosene". The kerosene passed around provided some relief for our peppery eyes, as we ran back towards the campus main gate.

3.30 pm. At the gate, we met the Vice Chancellor, Professor Wande Abimbola, who had come outside to appeal to the rampaging students to return to campus. The Prof was well-loved by the students, some of whom started singing, "*Babalawo mo wa bebe… Alugberen*" (a popular song of appeasement to Ifa Priests). As more students returned to the gate, there was a division in our ranks: some felt we hadn't done enough and wanted to remain in town. I joined the ranks of those who chose to return to campus, in deference to our beloved VC. I thought we had done enough for one day… tomorrow, we would continue. Thank goodness, there was no report of casualty among students.

Towards evening, the same day, information got to us that the Federal Government had announced an immediate and indefinite closure of all federal tertiary educational institutions. That brought down the curtains on any further protests. I packed my things from the hostel and headed to the residence of Dr Ogunbona, a family friend who lived at the University staff quarters, as prelude to returning to Lagos the next morning.

Dividends of Distraction

All the Federal Government universities and schools shut down in the aftermath of the nationwide students' unrest were eventually reopened for resumption of academic activities about two months later – all except the two most riotous ones that had the effrontery to engage in "criminal behaviour" (as government officials termed the unrest). The two were the University of Ife, for daring to break down Ile-Ife prisons, allowing 218 prisoners escape; and The Polytechnic, Kaduna, for daring to "abduct" and lock-up two uniformed policemen. Weeks ran into months. Eventually, it took the intervention of several well-meaning Nigerians, including traditional rulers, before the

Babangida-led Regime reconsidered its intention of keeping those two institutions locked for a full academic session. We were finally allowed to reopen in November, almost six months after the unrest! All returning students had to submit an undertaking to be of good behaviour, together with two references to the same effect, one of which must be endorsed by a Pastor or Imam. We had no choice but to comply.

Academic activities resumed in full swing to complete the academic session and commence the next one almost immediately. However, I had to rue my decision to get myself heavily distracted that year. I passed my courses at an average level, even had a resit in Psychology! It was unthinkable! My CGPA dropped from First Class to the shadowy borderline between Second Class Upper and Lower. Luckily, my parents seemed to understand the nature of the internal struggle and disappointment I was battling with. With their encouragement, I promised to do better. And better, I did.

In my final three semesters, I didn't stop all the extra-curricular activities I had immersed myself in, but I reduced them considerably. I remained a member of the SRC and also served in the Select Committee of the Students' Union. Besides, I hardly missed the big social events, like the all-campus bands' musical concerts and the beauty pageants, one of which ended in tragedy. The important thing, I figured, was to develop renewed interest in my course of study, finish well, and decide what to do with my life thereafter.

Even with all my best efforts, bringing my CGPA back to the First-Class region proved to be an impossible task. I finished my Bachelor's Degree with Second Class Upper Division (Honours), albeit a good one. I had learnt a big lesson: what is worth doing at all was worth doing well. It was a lesson that would resonate with me for several decades later.

Tragedy at Oduduwa Hall

It was the beginning of the 1986/87 Academic Session (my final year) when tragedy struck at Great Ife!

Scala Club was one of the foremost social clubs on campus. It always organised the annual Miss Campus Beauty Pageant, which brought together all the beauty queens from various university campuses nationwide. It was always a big event that attracted beauties and fans from Nigerian universities. Miss Uniport had won the previous year's edition, and they had come with another huge entourage, intent on defending their crown. Days before the event, busloads of students started arriving from across the country. One of them was my good childhood friend, Louis Abalu, who came all the way from the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. Luckily, I had bought my ticket for ₦5 well

ahead of time. My friend had to buy his at a premium (₦10) few days to the pageant.

The all-night show was to start at 9 pm. Three hours ahead of time, the multi-purpose Oduduwa Hall venue was already jam-packed. Had all these people bought tickets? It was clear that the venue could not accommodate all the willing spectators. Louis and I joined the throng only to realise that the access doors into the main auditorium was not yet open. We milled against one another, chatting excitedly.

When admittance into the venue started at about 7 pm, there was stampede. Everyone wanted to be the first to enter the hall in order to secure the best seats. Even those at the back pushed and shoved those in front, hoping to get in ahead of others. I heard a girl scream from behind, "you've broken my glasses, you idiot!" I looked back at the surging and struggle, just as someone's spit landed on my face! By the time we reached the entrance, the pressure from behind was incredible. I stumbled on the stairway but there was no room to fall down. Just as some of us began to feel choked, the bouncers at the gate lost their grip on the massive entrance door. The crowd surged in! Ticket confirmation prior to final entrance became impossible.

Louis and I rushed in. The first level was already filled to capacity. The second was filling fast. Before getting to the second level, all the seats were gone – completely taken up! I turned around to see that people were already filling up the stairway. We squeezed in somewhat. Oops! What a struggle. I pitied those still outside, battling to get in. The crowd kept milling in. Where would they sit now?

At about 9.30, the show had not started. Suddenly, we heard unmistakable wailings and cries from outside. What was happening?

"The organisers have released dogs to chase away the rest of the crowd so that the doors could be locked prior to commencement of the show" said some whisperers.

"It can't be. It must be police or security men driving them away."

More whispering: "Somebody is dead. She fell down and was trampled on!"

"Dead? Impossible!"

Another surge started. In the opposite direction. All of a sudden, all who rushed to come in were now rushing to leave the hall. Misapprehension took hold of me. There was still no clarity about what had happened outside. The crowd seemed to have come to a standstill. It took the better part of one hour to finally get out of the hall, which happened only after the momentous sound of ambulance siren had breezed in and out. Eight students had been taken to the University Health Centre, while a few critically injured ones had been

rushed to the University Teaching Hospital. Three of those were later confirmed dead! The Scala All Campus Beauty Pageant had ended in a monumental tragedy!

By the next morning, the University Authority announced an indefinite closure – all students were to vacate the campus immediately. Investigation into what went wrong commenced, which resulted in the Authority's placement of a ban on Scala Club and its annual beauty pageant. It was the end of an era!

CHAPTER 7: THICKER THAN BLOOD

"In prosperity, our friends know us; in adversity, we know our friends." ~ John Churton Collins

Just before pulling the curtains on my experiences at Great Ife, I must touch on how my great friend, Niyi Adewumi, made quite some difference.

It was during my second year at the Uni. It was also a particularly trying period at home, in terms of the finances. Leke and I resumed the second semester without taking enough money to last us through the semester, as was normally the practice. It was agreed that one of us should return home after two weeks to get the balance required. I did. I returned to campus late and had to wait till the next day to bank the ₦350 (which would amount to not less than ₦350,000, if now adjusted for inflation). The bank would not open until 8 am, so I took the money with me to class, as I had a 7 am test the following morning. We were obliged to drop all bags on the stage in front of class prior to the test. On getting to the bank later, I discovered that the money was gone! The entire money intended to last my brother and me for three months was gone!

I struggled unsuccessfully to understand what had happened. My brain refused to function. I simply broke down in the banking hall and wept. What would I tell my parents who had struggled seriously to raise that much? What would I tell Leke? I dared not return home. Strangers comforted me. I returned to the Humanities Auditorium 2, venue of the test. A frantic search everywhere yielded no fruit. The money was truly gone! I felt like simply disappearing from the face of the earth.

Leke and I agreed we couldn't return home to ask for any more money. We had to survive somehow. Some friends, like the Adeyegbes (Sola and his brother, Wole) were very helpful in sharing some of their meals with us. A number of roommates also helped. In the midst of all that confusion and suffering, Niyi stood tall. Incredibly, he split his own allowance in two, offering a whooping one hundred Naira to Leke and me! I tried to refuse him but he wouldn't hear of it. He consoled me with the eternal words, "This too, shall pass." Wow! What a friend!

We kept managing. It was not easy but we kept pushing on till the following month. Then, unexpectedly, a message came on the public address system.

"Leke and Tunde Aina, please report to the Porters' Lodge. You have a visitor."

We scrambled to the Porters. Behold, it was Mum! She came in the company of Sola, Wole and their mother, Mrs Adeyegbe. What? We hugged one another. Curiosity overpowered me.

"What are you doing here?"

"The Adeyegbes told us what happened. Either Sola or Wole managed to get word across to their parents. They told us in church," came her reply.

I burst into tears.

"I'm deeply sorry, Mum."

"It's okay. Everything is going to be fine. Don't worry." She hugged me afresh.

Before leaving, she dropped ₦200 for us. Mrs Adeyegbe supported the fund with another ₦50. We hugged one another again. The incredible gesture and support of Niyi and the Adeyegbes during that trying period left an indelible mark on me. When I tried to return Niyi's ₦100, he refused to take it back. I insisted that he must. We ended up splitting it fifty-fifty. What would anyone do without friends… true friends to help navigate the vicissitudes of life!

A Call to National Service

On completion of my first degree programme, it was time for the National Youth Service. I was filled with apprehension regarding where I would be posted to. A few weeks after our enrolment for the Service, the posting was released: I was posted to Benue State and was expected to report to the Katsina-Ala NYSC Orientation Camp on Sunday, 30 August, 1987.

Benue State for me! I, who had never travelled beyond Lagos, Ogun and Oyo States. Mum could hardly sleep. She urged Dad to step in and try to change the posting from Benue to any closer state. Dad was unmoved. Neither was I. Getting out of my comfort zone by having to go that far from home would be quite some experience. We had no idea in which part of Benue Katsina-Ala was. It was decided that I should fly into Makurdi, the State capital, and find my way from there. I would be flying for the first time: what a brilliant idea!

On D day, my parents and I arrived the Lagos airport early for a Nigeria Airways flight that was scheduled for take-off at 9.45 am. We had bought the ticket earlier at ₦62.50k, with a 25% student rebate. The scheduled time came and went. One hour passed. Nothing happened: no boarding call. No apologies. Exasperated, Dad and I went to make enquiries.

"Please bear with us a few more minutes. We have some technical difficulties," said the airline official.

That "few more minutes" lasted another four hours, as we eventually took off at about 4 pm. While awaiting my luggage at Makurdi airport, I overheard a young man enquiring about how to get from the airport to Katsina-Ala. I guessed he was headed to the NYSC Camp, so I moved closer.

"Hello. I'm Tunde Aina. Would you by any chance be going to Katsina-Ala for NYSC camping?"

"You're absolutely right," he replied.

"That makes two of us. We can travel together."

"Great. My name is Tobi Oke-Osanyintolu. It's a pleasure meeting you."

"Same here." We shook hands.

That was how Tobi and I met and became companions.

As directed, we both took a vehicle from Makurdi to Gboko, which was rather uneventful. While waiting for the vehicle to fill-up at Katsina-Ala Park in Gboko, another prospective corps member joined our vehicle – a lady called Amaka. Since we were now three heading to the same location, on my suggestion, we pleaded with the driver to take us directly to the NYSC Orientation Camp in Katsina-Ala. He agreed, not without a promise of a token appreciation on our part though.

The trip from Makurdi to Katsina-Ala was more adventurous. No, not because of the presence of Amaka. Well, admittedly, that somewhat added to the excitement. Our vehicle had a brake-down at an extremely unwholesome spot – in a flooded, muddy part of the road. The driver struggled to fix his car. It took roughly about two hours, part of which we spent pushing the car and looking around for something to ward off the pangs of hunger that had set in. By the time we were through, darkness had set in.

"Have you ever travelled this way before?" Amaka asked, turning to me.

Both Tolu and I responded in the negative.

"Hope we're safe on this route, especially now that it's dark," she continued in a whisper.

"We hope so." I whispered in return.

"I feel rather relaxed with you guys, fellow youth corpers around me, otherwise I would have become jittery by now." Amaka concluded thankfully.

We finally arrived safely at the Katsina-Ala Orientation Camp at almost 10 pm. Surprisingly, NYSC officials were still available to welcome us to camp,

give out the kits and allocate rooms to us. Tolu and I chose to be in the same room. I had a good sleep that night, a deep, dreamless one.

The next morning, the regimented para-military life of the orientation camp commenced. As early as 4.30 am, the beagle would go off, at the sound of which we were expected to double-up (i.e. start jogging) from our room to the assembly ground. I fell into 12 Platoon, and was later made its Leader, as well as the Commander, 3 Guard for the parades. The parade rehearsals were rigorous but quite interesting. I enjoyed every bit of them. Also enjoyable were the "Man-o-War" activities, specifically designed to test and improve our physical fitness. Endurance Trek, during which we embarked on a 30km walk and mountain climbing, was an important highlight of our camping experience, which was rounded off with games and "fire night".

A Welcome at Pevikya-Sankara

Prior to our Passing-Out-Parade, many youth corpers tried to influence their Place of Primary Assignment (PPA) posting through hobnobbing with camp officials and sheer bootlicking. I never bothered, just as I didn't do any lobbying to influence my state of posting. I had one mindset: a strong determination to serve wherever I was posted to. I felt that, as long as human beings lived there, it would be an experience. On the final day of camp, the PPA posting was released, and mine was NKST Secondary School, Pevikya-Sankara, Benue State. Where was that? Nobody seemed to know until one of the camp officials told me that the principal of the school had come to take the three of us posted to NKST. Great!

The three of us – Ibrahim Takum, Solomon Ajayi and I (all male) joined the school principal, and shortly embarked on another 95km journey to our PPA. Pevikya turned out to be a remote village at the border of Benue and Gongola State. Gongola was the State later partitioned into two: Adamawa and Taraba. The village had neither electricity nor pipe-borne water! The reception, however, was top-notch. We were received at the premises of the Head of the NKST Mission, Pastor Pheelangwah, while the community Chief had arranged a band of singers and villagers to give us a rousing welcome with their local music and dances. Things were getting interesting already.

"I'm going to love it here," Ibrahim nudged me excitedly. "See the topless dames dancing for us."

"But there's nothing to be excited about in this," I retorted. "They're not exactly pretty."

"See you. These are natural beauties, untainted by make-up. What else do you want?"

"What are you guys whispering about?" Solomon chipped in.

"Nothing."

I meant it. It was nothing of note, really. I wasn't interested in the local girls, with or without make-up, topless or otherwise; and I truly couldn't see what Ibrahim's excitement was all about. There was a lot to eat and drink. The pounded yam and local vegetable soup was inexhaustible. When offered the local brew, called *burukutu*, Solomon and I declined. Ibrahim took his. By the time we retired for the night, I was exhausted.

All three of us were accommodated in a three-bedroom mud bungalow located at the back of Pastor Pheelangwah's residence. The parlour was bare while each room was sparsely furnished with an iron bed and a wooden chair. I noticed the effort being made to make us feel welcome. It was the first time that NYSC had honoured their request by sending corps members to their community school. The cheery news was the Pastor's promise that our bungalow would be connected to the community-serviced power generator being used in the Pastor's residence. His promise was not an empty one; it was fulfilled two days later.

Thus, our bungalow was provided with electricity for twelve hours – 6 pm to 6 am daily. Not bad at all. Well, so I thought until I heard some eerie faint crawling sound from the ceiling! I was too exhausted to care and was soon overpowered by sleep.

I was awoken by the same sound, louder this time, at dawn. What could be crawling on the ceiling? Rats? Then I jumped up at a falling sound. Something had fallen into my room through a broken part of the ceiling! Grabbing the touch-light by my bed, I scrambled to my feet and beamed the light in the direction of what had fallen. It lay there on my floor, stunned and helpless but alive. I picked it up: a bat! Goose pimples came all over me. The bungalow was bat-infested!

"Hello, Mr. Bat. The name is Tunde Aina. I'm your new neighbour." I introduced myself telepathically, as more crawling and whistling sound came from the ceiling. Then, I opened my door and flung it out. I had to. I didn't want to start my Youth Service by killing someone. A bat, too, was someone. What a welcome to Pevikya!

Odu Ifa to the Rescue

I became a teacher of English Language and Literature for senior students at NKST Secondary School. At 21, I was younger than many of my students, most of whom were married and quite surprised that I was still single. The English classes were not quite easy for many of them, as their background

in the subject was generally very poor. I had to go back to giving them the basics. When, on a Monday, I gave them an assignment on *Concord in English*, and requested that submission was due the following day, a number of them started giggling. Any problem? More giggles… no response. I shrugged and left.

"Where is everybody?" I asked the following morning, feeling somewhat exasperated that only four students came to class.

"Today is market day" answered one of the four.

"So what?" And that was when the giggles started again.

"On market days, they go to the local market to sell their produce and other wares." The response came from the school principal, who stood at the doorway.

After school hours, Solomon and I decided to visit the local market. The atmosphere was loud and gay; the mood, festive. Many people donned their Sunday attire. We joined the festival, danced to the music and took a couple of drinks before heading home. Every market day was a festive occasion. Little wonder that many students would rather miss school than miss the market day festivities. On their scale of preference, schooling didn't rank very high.

The students' general lackadaisical attitude to education soon had expression during the terminal exams. Despite my best efforts, few students grasped the nuances of English grammar that I tried to teach them. Few others became more serious with their studies as exams approached, but some couldn't be bothered. Few days to the exams, the Principal approached me.

"Please have mercy on the students. Just give the unserious ones the least pass mark and let them go."

"I don't see why I should do that. Those who are unserious should not be rewarded with pass marks; they should get what they deserve."

"I know what I'm talking about. Haven't you noticed some tendency to rascality among some of the bigger boys?" continued the Principal, his face showing concern.

"Never mind. I used to have such tendency too. All I have to do is reawaken it." I said, smiling as I made for the staffroom entrance.

Tendency to rascality! The Principal had struck a note of warning. What would the so-called bigger boys do if they failed? Could my life be in danger? Would they be rascally enough to attack me? Not likely. In the unlikely event they did, what then? How could I save myself? I remembered what I had learnt in my early days in the school. On realising that I was Yoruba, some of the teachers and students had sought to know if it was true that the Yorubas

had "juju" (mystical powers) as often portrayed in their movies. I confirmed their fears… even added voodooism as one of our stock in trade. The "Oodu Ifa" I had learnt during my traditional religion project suddenly became a mind worm for me. They were quite some worm!

The exams came and went. Some passed. Many of the "bigger boys" failed, deservedly so. Uneasy silence swept through the class as I gave out the scripts.

"Why you fail us?" One of the boys was bold enough to ask.

"I didn't fail you. You failed!"

"English, *Ngu ga!*"

"So, you know you don't understand English? That's why you should be more serious in class, if you want to pass. Better luck next term."

Those boys did not wait till next term. It happened that weekend. On my way back from a visit to a friend in the next village, I was accosted by three of them along a bush path. I saw them appear from the bush about forty metres ahead of me.

"You fail us." One of them blurted out, accusingly.

I stopped in my track. I seemed to know intuitively that some of them would approach me from the back. I turned to look. I was right – two others were moving towards me from behind. Five against one! What would I do? In a split second, scenes of Chinese movies I had watched in childhood crossed my mind. I saw acrobatic Bruce Lee outwitting scores of enemies… then, Samson took over, massacring the Philistines… Amitabh Bachchan took over from Samson, defeating all his assailants in one swoop…. I banished the images. I was faced by an existential threat, and all I could do was watch movies in my head!

I had never been in that kind of dangerous situation. Now I just had to survive. What would you do? Beg for mercy? Out of the question! I moved forward cautiously, hoping that my face hadn't betrayed the fear within me. I fingered my black wrist band, dipped my right hand in my pocket and, even to my own surprise, beckoned on my would-be assailants to keep coming. My gesture seemed to surprise them. They stopped. I had won the first battle: the mind game.

My hand felt only the white handkerchief in my pocket. I crumpled it in my fist, brought it out, lifted both hands up in the air and screamed thus:

Eriwo Yaah! Eriwo Yaah!
Bede, Omo won l'ode Ipo;
Awe, Omo won ode Ijesha,

Omirin mirin, Ara Iremurin,
Igi gangan gan ma gun mi l'oju;
Otamuje gbe ebiti oran k'ale.
Arira nla, a b'oju rotoroto,
Awon ni won d'Ifa fun Orunmila,
Ni ojo ti won kebo keji n t'Ifa,
Ifa ni e sin di rikisi ti un;
… Orogbo kan, Oguso kan,
Ara yin ni e ji, ara yin ni e ku gbongondon!
Baba mi, Orunmila n mo nke pe:
F'ija fun mi jaa!!! etc

Even before completing my incantation, I rushed towards the boys. They turned around and fled! I rushed after them in desperate pursuit. Even those behind me had jumped into the bush. They ran for dear life - all five of them! One had prevailed against five! My knowledge of "Odu Ifa" (Ifa panegyrics) had come to my aid in my hour of need. All thanks to Orunmila!

By Monday, word had gone round the school: that *Oga* Tunde was a "juju man"; that *Oga* Tunde had gnomes in his house fighting for him; that *Oga* Tunde had spiritual powers that could kill any enemy and was, therefore, not afraid of anyone! Really? I revelled in those rumours, even encouraged them. None of those rascals would dare plan an attack against me again! Hmmm, powerful *Oga* Tunde! None could have doubted my powers. Wasn't I powerful? Ifa Literary Corpus! Truly, knowledge is power!

A "Perilous" Journey

At the end of the term, I had to travel home for Christmas. I found, to my dismay, that there had been a 100% increase in flight cost. Having to dole out over ₦125 to fly from Makurdi to Lagos was unthinkable, when my NYSC monthly allowance was only ₦200. It had been rumoured that the allowance would soon be increased to ₦250 but, if there was any truth to that, it was yet to materialise. Having resolved to travel by road, I was advised to take a night bus from Wukari (Gongola State) to Onitsha, and move on the next morning to Lagos. And that was how it went – a smooth journey all the way. The return journey, however, was a different kettle of fish.

I had planned to break my return journey by having a stopover in Makurdi, where I could spend a night with fellow youth corps members. It was not to be. In the absence of a bus to Makurdi, I took a morning bus from Oyingbo (in Lagos) to Otukpo, Benue State, in my NYSC uniform. It was a smooth ride until we had a breakdown at the middle of nowhere. Some of us alighted from the bus to get some fresh air.

"Where are you serving?" asked a stranger from the same bus.

I looked at the face of the enquirer: a young handsome man of about 30. Feeling slightly irritated, more by the breakdown than the stranger's question, I responded: "Pevikya".

His face lit up. "That's after Zaki-Biam on the way to Wukari. It's very far. You have quite a journey ahead of you."

"You know the place?" It was my turn to show interest.

"Very well… Pardon my manners. I'm Joe, Joe Onoja."

"Tunde Aina".

I know Pevikya very well. I lived there as a child. I'm heading home to Aliade, near Otukpo."

"Nice to meet you". We shook hands. We continued our banter.

Almost four hours after the breakdown, our frustrating wait was over. I begged to exchange seat with the person next to Joe. I had found in him an interesting conversationalist. He had told me he was the last born in a family of 12, and he was returning home from a visit to his elder brother who was a military officer in Lagos. He was obliged to remain in the village to take care of their aged parents. The journey continued without incident until my conversation with Joe was interrupted by an itinerant preacher who had joined the bus at the point of the breakdown. He had finished preaching and was now about to pray.

"Let the men remove their caps while women find something to cover their heads," instructed the preacher.

I ignored him.

"Hey, bobo Corper, honour God by removing your cap."

He offered his prayer when he noticed that I wasn't moved, after which he made a remark about "education making one arrogant".

"Are you not a Christian?" Joe asked me afterwards.

"I am. I just don't believe in disturbing people's peace at public places, in the name of preaching. This is not a church."

"You know, because of that breakdown, it's going to be very late by the time we reach Otukpo. How do you hope to continue your journey?" Joe sounded quite concerned.

"At this rate, with the bus moving rather slowly, I have no idea." I hesitated before continuing, "Maybe I'll find a police station at Otukpo to pass the night."

"If you don't mind, you may pass the night in my house at Aliade. Then you can continue tomorrow."

Without thinking through the situation, I nodded my head. "That's very kind of you. I'll do just that. Thank you."

We alighted at Aliade. It was about 11.30 pm on a moonless night. We trekked along a paved road for a while before branching off to a bush path. It was so pitch dark that I had an eerie feeling – a feeling of impending doom! It was at that point I started contemplating the precariousness of my situation: Why did I agree to follow a total stranger to his house? Was I under a spell? Could I be in danger? What if the man was a ritualist? Could this be my end? I offered silent prayers. My thoughts were interrupted by Joe.

"Be careful on this path. Follow my footsteps, so you don't fall into a ditch."

"You bet, I will."

We made a couple of turns. A change of mind was now out of the question, as I could easily get lost in that bush. I was now afraid and inwardly shaken. What a stupid decision I had made! I was convinced I was in trouble. Should I start invoking *Orunmila* again? Would chant of *"Eriwo Yaah"* scare this man? I decided not. I was deeply conflicted. I gave myself some courage by reciting Psalm 123 silently: "The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want… Even though I pass through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil…" etc.

All my fears turned out to be unfounded. We soon arrived at a village. I could now make out the silhouette of a compound and huts ahead. It was 12.20 am. Joe approached one of the huts and knocked. He spoke a language (probably Idoma) that I didn't understand. An elderly woman opened the door. The duo spoke in tongues. The woman and I exchanged greetings, with Joe serving as an interpreter. I was offered one of the huts in which there was a wooden bed with a straw mat, not mattress, on it. Surprisingly, I slept, and dreamlessly too. More surprisingly, I woke up the next morning. I had neither been robbed nor killed! Thank God!

The rest of my trip was uneventful. On returning to Pevikya, I penned a long letter to my parents, which took almost three weeks to get delivered. Without my sending the letter, they had no means of knowing if I had arrived at my destination safely; and they would not see me again till the Easter break (see Chapter 9). Shortly after that journey, I fell ill. Perhaps it was the stress of the journey. I treated malaria, but my fever refused to abate. What could be the problem?

An Overwhelming Wave

I had to go to hospital. Luckily for me, the NKST Hospital was just a stone throw from my premises. Tests conducted showed I had typhoid fever, and the doctor decided to place me on injection rather than tablets. The young nurse who administered the injection was extremely courteous, despite being overwhelmed by the sheer number of patients she had to attend to. I was impressed.

"You don't have to wince, it's not going to be painful." Her voice was certainly reassuring.

"I don't like injections" was the only response I could muster.

"So, you're one of the three corps members posted to this community last October?"

"Yes… What's a beautiful one like you doing here?" I asked, feeling mesmerised by her natural beauty.

"I'm an intern. I come here daily from Wukari."

"I see…. I'm Tunde Aina. What's yours?"

"Terna".

A beautiful nurse. I liked her already. Without my permission, my heartbeats suddenly started a 100-metre sprint, as if it was practising to be part of the approaching Seoul Olympics!

Two weeks later. I was now well again and had no excuse to go back to the hospital. But Terna would not leave me alone. No, her disturbance wasn't physical. She had invaded my thoughts, my dreams, my heart. I longed for her so much that, a few days later, on my way back home from school, I decided to just check up on her at the hospital. "She's not on duty today" was the disappointing response I got from the elderly nurse on duty. I left, hoping she would deliver my message to the lady who had been robbing me of sleep.

I needed not have worried about that. The next day, towards evening, there was a gentle knock on my door. I opened it. Standing at my door, looking gorgeously radiant in her all-white outfit, was Terna! She smiled. A most ravishing smile. My heart did a triple summersault, followed by another sprint! This must be the 1988 Olympics finale. She offered her hand. I took it. She stepped in. We became friends.

You remember the days of my struggles from secondary school? Those struggles that made me beg God to "let this cup pass over me", and how the "cups" became "buckets", even "drums"? I survived them all. Even

throughout my undergraduate days, I managed to survive… but only just. Unbelievable, right? My situation now was beyond all that. This was no cup, no bucket, no drum. This was an oceanic wave… voluptuous, gentle, yet strong. Waves overwhelm. And this was no exception!

CHAPTER 8: THE RAT RACE BEGINS

"If you enjoy work, it's not work." ~ Mark Twain

The Elusive Quest

Prior to the completion of my National Youth Service, I had applied to the Joint Admissions & Matriculation Board (JAMB) for Direct Entry admission into the Law programme of the University of Lagos (Unilag). Yes, I was that determined to follow what I had come to see as my heart's desire, despite my inability to change to Law in Ife. I had also applied to the same university for Post-Graduate Diploma (PGD) in Mass Communication, and written the requisite qualifying examination. Getting into fulltime work was, therefore, the last thing on my mind.

The admission for the PGD came first. We were required to pay an acceptance fee of ₦80. I treated the admission with disdain by not paying the fee – a decision I was to regret later. My eye was on Law. Why waste money on a distraction? I would rather wait for JAMB Direct Entry admission. There was no reason why I would not be admitted.

The waiting was soon over. The admission list was released towards the end of September, 1988. I rushed to the JAMB Headquarters in Ikoyi. I was confident that, having finished with a brilliant Second Class Upper Division degree in English from no less an institution than the University of Ife, my securing admission for Law was, more or less, a formality. I was right. My name was No. 5 on the Unilag admission list for Law. Eureka! At last, my dream was coming to pass! All successful candidates were asked to come for our admission letter the following week.

Monday came. 8 am met me at the JAMB Admission Office. An hour later, there was already a sizable number, but for some reason that was not immediately clear, we were kept waiting for hours. One candidate shouted in desperation, "Make una answer us now! Abi una wan do *magomago*?" Thereafter, rumours started flying around that the admission list had been cancelled. Impossible!

It turned out that the rumour was not totally false. It was much later in the afternoon that we were informed that there had been a directive from the National Universities Commission that: candidates already in possession of first degree should be encouraged to pursue Masters' degree programmes, rather than crowding out those with A' Levels, by taking up a number of the admission slots. The admission already offered such first degree holders was withdrawn forthwith! What? You couldn't possibly give me a more devastating news at that time. I returned home, despondent.

"What are you going to do now?" Mum asked, deeply concerned.

"I don't know. I should have accepted the PGD admission. But who could have thought it was going to end this way?" I lamented.

"Will you look for a job now?"

"I don't know!" My response was more of a shout of frustration.

One day, I was certain what I was going to do next with my life. The next day, everything just blew up in my face. I was thoroughly confused. I needed time to think things through. Job hunting? For some inexplicable reason, I was scared of that prospect. At 22, I felt I was not yet matured for a fulltime work-life. Then I remembered that some of my former classmates in secondary school who, either didn't succeed in gaining admission into higher institution of learning or didn't have anyone who could sponsor them for further education, had already joined the workforce. For them, the rat race started as early as 16 or 17. Now, Tunde, you've got to join the same race. I just couldn't see any alternative.

Vagaries of the Job Market

It is difficult trying to remember what made me think that jobs were available just for the asking. I was in for a surprise. I had been told that remuneration in the banking sector was quite high. So, I was elated when I saw an Equitorial Trust Bank advertisement for job vacancies in the Dailies. It was even more interesting to read that they wanted "first or second class upper graduates of any discipline". On the day of the aptitude test, however, my heart sank. There were thousands of us, literally! How many would they take? Nobody seemed to know.

My quest for a white-collar job in blue chip companies continued for months to no avail. The best I got was being invited by a number of companies to oral interview, which almost invariably ended with "you will hear from us". Most of them didn't even deem it fit to honour their promise, even with a negative outcome. It was African Petroleum, Republic Bank, and Rank Xerox that gave me false hopes by going as far as discussing remuneration. Thereafter, nothing!

I shifted my gaze to insurance companies. Even without seeing any advertisement, I would just comb the length and breadth of Lagos and Victoria Islands, showing my credentials to Heads of HR who cared to give me audience. I had assumed that they always required agents, right? In a way, yes. But the only kind of offer I got was to join their employ as a commission agent: no salary; and, in many cases, no transportation allowance. I thought the prospect depressing, and turned down the offers.

Meanwhile, I got a part-time engagement as an English and Literature teacher at PAFA Academy, Ajao Estate (along Airport Road). The Academy prepared students for School Certificate, GCE and Joint Matriculation Examinations. Before long, I was bombarded by requests from parents who needed a private English teacher for their children. PAFA academy paid hourly rates of ₦5/hour, while the private classes paid triple that rate. Those classes kept me busy from January through April, 1989, when I received two job offers virtually simultaneously.

I received the good news that I had been offered a job in the Federal Civil Service on Friday, 28 April, and that I was to go with identification and see the Commissioner for Lagos and Ogun at the Federal Civil Service Commission in Ikoyi, Lagos, to receive my letter of appointment. I wasn't particularly excited. I didn't want to be a civil servant because I had heard that the pay was poor. I was literally pressured to fill the application for the civil service job, while I was hopeful that something better would come my way.

Something else did come up: an offer from The Guardian Newspapers. I stopped at their Head Office along Oshodi-Mile 2 Expressway on the same day that I collected my civil service appointment letter: May 2, 1989. With great enthusiasm, I opened my letter of offer from the Guardian. My bubble burst! It was a temporary Assistant Proof-reader's position, pending when they would be ready to offer me a permanent appointment. I was to be paid a weekly allowance of ₦80. The man who gave me the letter must have noticed my disappointment.

"You better thank your stars. This is as good as it gets for an applicant without a degree in Mass Communication or at least a diploma in Journalism."

"Thank you." I signed the receipt slip and quietly stepped out into the blazing sun.

A week earlier, I would have taken the offer thankfully, hoping to clinch the permanent offer whenever the opportunity came. I felt terribly deflated. Should I take the Guardian offer in the hope that I could progressively build a career in the Media Industry? I had thrown away the opportunity to go for PGD in Mass Communication. Now, this! I didn't like the idea of becoming a civil servant, but the civil service offer suddenly loomed large, taunting me; or rather tempting me to take a bite from its fruit. To be or not to be? Adam and Eve flashed through my mind. I wondered as I headed back home: this was not a forbidden fruit; why be so reluctant?

After contemplating my options overnight, I resolved to take the civil service offer. For one thing, it sounded like an offer of a permanent appointment. For another, I felt I could continue my services with PAFA Academy, which was a part-time work, as classes were held only in the evenings. On the other hand, the Guardian offer sounded too casual. Weekly

allowance, not monthly salary? What if the permanent offer never came? Why throw away certainty for uncertainty? I made my choice.

The next day, I submitted my letter of appointment at the Headquarters of the Federal Ministry of Works & Housing, and followed up over the next few days. I was eventually requested to return for documentation the following week, and that I was to report to the ACEO (Appointment). When I was told, on enquiry, that ACEO meant Assistant Chief Executive Officer, my head swelled up. I was going to meet the Assistant CEO so soon? That was cool, though quite unexpected. Could "documentation" be a kind of interview? I must come in by best attire. A suit would be ideal! Luckily, I had one.

The documentation was an anti-climax. The ACEO (Appointment) turned out to be a Grade Level 13 officer whose duty was to document new employees and post them to appropriate schedules of duty. I yanked off my tie to reduce the impact of my turning out overdressed. Just then, a man behind me on the queue couldn't hide his ecstasy.

"Oh my God, I thank you for your faithfulness." He continued with gesticulations of thanksgiving, "After four years, oh my God, glory be to your name."

"Four years of what?" I had allowed my curiosity take the better side of me.

"It's been four solid years since my graduation. I'm just getting a job." The man answered unabashedly.

What? My few months of job hunting paled into insignificance.

"Congratulations". I offered my hand. "I'm Tunde. Tunde Aina".

"Mubo Adedokun". He clasped my hand in an iron grip.

We later got deployed to different divisions - he to Planning and I to Budget - in the same Department: Planning, Research & Statistics. I couldn't help admiring his determination and resilience. I realised, for the first time, that even, as far back as the 1980s, we had graduates roaming our streets in search of jobs – jobs that kept disappearing by the day. Mubo! Four years post-graduation and three years on the job market before fortune smiled on him! He must be a man of destiny. That was how Mubo and I became friends – a friendship that has lasted until this day.

Aso-Ebi "Palava"

On the job, I shared the same office with a number of officers who were all new employees. My first boss was a Level 13 Officer, Mrs Adedeji. She taught me the rudiments of budgeting and encouraged me to write the confirmation

exam in good time. She asked why I chose to be in Budget and I had to let her know that it wasn't my choice; it was just incidental, as I could have been deployed to any other division. We had a good relationship, as she was kind and motherly towards me.

My monthly take-home pay was ₦520; and, because the first payment took four months to come, I collected over ₦2000. That was something! I felt like a mini-millionaire! I turned my pay-packet over to my parents so that they could take whatever share they felt like from their son's first pay. They had a right to it. The feeling of being able to give something back to my parents from my hard-earned money, after their years of toil over me, was exhilarating! Besides, I was still living under their roof and eating their food.

The following year, the Layemos were preparing for the wedding of their first daughter, Bimbo. The Layemo family were close family-friends, and we were deeply involved in the preparations. It was going to be a big "society wedding" with the full complements of a church wedding, a grand reception and an all-night party showcasing a live musical band. We were all very excited. Then Ayo, Bimbo's brother, brought me the "aso-ebi". At ₦450, I felt the cost was prohibitive. That was almost my full month's pay! I cringed; but, as I didn't want to be the "odd one out", I bought it, even though I had to pay the money in two instalments.

My own *aso-ebi* was a child's play compared to the one brought for my parents. At ₦2,000 for his and ₦1,500 for Mum's own, Dad had to dole out a whooping ₦3,500 just for *aso-ebi*. That was almost seven times my take-home pay! I was flabbergasted. That kind of money was almost enough to buy a fairly-used car! What was the sense in doling out that much money for *aso-ebi*? I felt even more enraged when I realised that many family members who bought the aso-ebi couldn't pay up subsequently, despite their best struggles. The Layemos eventually had to write-off a large portion of the debts of those who took the clothes on credit. I found myself struggling to make sense of this *aso-ebi* madness.

Why must people, especially many of those struggling to make ends meet, feel compelled to buy expensive *aso-ebi*? I had never liked the idea of wearing uniforms. I cherished individuality, not uniformity. I knew many mothers who would rather starve than miss purchasing *aso-ebi* and many who went begging for money to pay their children's school fees shortly after failing to resist the urge of buying into the *aso-ebi* craze! Were we cursed? Would *aso-ebi* give you admittance into paradise? How did this madness start? Why must we feel so compelled to buy *aso-ebi* that many would go into debts just to meet-up with the Joneses?

From that moment, I stamped my feet on the ground and screamed: "Never again!" Never again would I join the craze for *aso-ebi*, irrespective of

the cost. I vowed that I would never buy *aso-ebi* with anyone again, no matter how close our relationship. Neither would I have occasion to ask anyone to buy *aso-ebi* with me – be it for my wedding, burial of any of my parents or wedding of any of my children. I broke that jinx. Never again!

On-the-Job Training

My immediate boss, Mrs Adedeji, as the Head of the Recurrent Section of Budget, reported to the Deputy Director (Budget), Mr Peter Odili, who was an easy-going gentleman. He felt that the internal briefing given to new officers on assumption of duty was inadequate to prepare us for the job challenges ahead, and he soon secured a national training programme for those of us in Budget. Thus, Mr Wakili Ibrahim, one of my colleagues, and I were nominated to attend a two-week intensive training on Budgeting for Efficient Economic Management at the Premier Hotel, Ibadan. Each of us received a Touring Advance of ₦2,000 to take care of our transportation expenses, hotel accommodation and feeding for the duration of the programme.

The training programme, which was well-organised by the National Centre for Economic Management and Administration, attracted participants from various government departments and agencies across the country. We had the opportunity of exchanging ideas and perspectives with various professionals in the relaxed ambience of a luxurious hotel. Moreover, I made new friends, among whom were Jim Jaja from the Ministry of Transport and Aviation, Catherine Jack from National Planning and Uche Okonkwo from Education. It was a beautiful experience.

After paying all my bills, I had an unspent balance of ₦128. On return to Lagos, we were required to submit a report of the training and also retire the ₦2,000 advance given to us. I duly retired the advance, paid back the balance to government chest, and got a treasury receipt acknowledging my payment. During the process, I couldn't help wondering why the accounts officials who processed the refund were bemused. They all looked at me strangely, seemingly shocked that a government official was returning unspent balance of his touring advance.

"You did what?" My boss screamed at me when I told her what I had just done.

"I returned my unspent balance to the treasury. Was that a wrong thing to do?" I asked, surprised at the general reaction of almost everyone around me.

"Very wrong. Look, when government gives you money for an assignment, there's no question of returning unspent balance. In fact, some officers would even request for out-of-pocket expenses for overspending."

"But…" I retorted in self-defence, "The money was more than enough. I loved the training and also enjoyed myself at the hotel for two weeks - all at government expense. Isn't that enough? Besides, we were told that all expenses must be receipted. I had to return the unspent balance. How could that be wrong?"

"Ha! *Pele o*… JJC. You will soon understand."

"Okay ma." I left my boss' office even more puzzled than when I went in.

In the Service of God

On the church front, I became more active than ever. Some of us, young adults, suddenly noticed that we had become too old to remain members of "Ogo Oluwa" Society, which was primarily meant for young boys. We came together and formed the Young Men Christian Association (YMCA) at CAC, Olorunsogo. Sola Adeyegbe and I worked on the Association's Constitution, which was ultimately approved by the Congress (i.e. the general house). Two years later, Sola emerged as the President of YMCA, while I served as the Secretary General. Elder Taiwo and Mrs Titiloye were appointed as our Patron and patroness respectively.

Taking a cue from us, the ladies formed the Ladies Christian League (LCL), and my dad, Elder Adeyemi Aina, was appointed the Patron. He had been ordained as an Elder and appointed the Secretary of the Church Council of Pastors and Elders, some years earlier. The annual anniversaries of both YMCA and LCL became a festival of sorts, such that both groups became the cynosure of the eyes of all the young men and ladies of the church. In the accompanying socialisation and fanfare, all my misgivings concerning Bible and church doctrines soon became relegated to the background, albeit temporarily.

More serious assignments soon came calling. By 1990, the need to have more capable interpreters to translate all church activities, announcements and sermons from Yoruba into English became quite obvious. After going through a process of nomination and interview, I was appointed a Church Interpreter, in which position I had the opportunity of translating into English, the Yoruba sermons delivered by the District Overseer or any of the church Pastors, Evangelists and Elders, including my dad.

Having been used to debating while in secondary school and speaking in students' Parliament in the university, it came to me as a surprise that I was quite nervous on my first day as an interpreter. My hand shook so visibly, I was afraid that I would drop the microphone. Thank goodness for the microphone stand, which I gladly opted to use. The day was saved. Contrary to my expectation, I received lots of accolades for doing a good job. Well, that was

something. By my next assignment, my nervy experience was over. More accolades!

As Dad's duties as Church Secretary required him to stay back after church service for the weekly meeting of the Board of Pastors and Elders, I often waited for him. Whenever, there was no YMCA meeting, I would use the opportunity to do some reading at the Church Library. To my delight, the library had quite a lot of interesting collections, including - as unbelievable as it might sound - books on Eckankar, Summit Light House, Bhagavad Gita, dream interpretation, soul travelling and several other books that the average Christian would regard as "unchristianly".

I found that one could do a study on comparative religion at our library. It gave me an opportunity to pursue my interest in studying other religions. By now, my revered Evangelist Olawepo was getting weary of my enquiries into other religions, as he felt that I might be led astray. I only smiled. I didn't want to jolt him by telling him that if I found anything better than Christianity, I would not hesitate to jump boats. In any event, CAC Olorunsogo Library, in those days, was a trove! I fell in love with the collections. Thus, the library became my second home.

On an occasion, I borrowed a book form the Library: *God's Foreknowledge and Man's Free Will*, written by Pastor Pryse. It raised in my mind a whole new set of questions regarding the origin of evil. Did God foreknow our actions? What about our ultimate destination in heaven or hell? If God already knew such things, and his foreknowledge was perfect, could human beings really be said to have free will? Could our will change what was already foreknown? If so, could God's foreknowledge be perfect? Wasn't his will immutable?

Another book written by a Jewish Rabi, who lost his 13-year old son to rapid ageing – known in medical circles as *progeria syndrome* – was also a compelling read. The book, titled *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* raised even deeper questions concerning the inequalities and injustices of life. Why were children sometimes afflicted with various diseases, including cancer or, worse still, *naegleria fowleri?* What did they do to deserve such experiences? Why did it seem that good and terrible experiences of life happen randomly to people, irrespective of their godliness, righteousness or otherwise?

Thus, my questions and accompanying doubts were back, after all. I'd always known that I couldn't possibly disregard them for too long. They descended on me like an avalanche. I was restless – very restless. The Seeker in me could no longer be suppressed. I just needed answers. If the answers were to be found in any religion other than Christianity, so be it. I was

passionate about truth, and I was willing to follow it wherever it could be found. Truth! Where art thou?

CHAPTER 9: FAREWELL TO CHURCH

"A lot of people are leaving the church and going back to God." ~ Gene Emerson

In my quest for spiritual enlightenment, I couldn't help wondering how the Bible could have got it so wrong. I needed to know more about the authors of the books of the Bible and how they missed the truth on many counts, yet had the effrontery to proclaim such a book as the Word of God. Who were those who came to such a questionable conclusion? It was time to delve into more research.

Digging into Bible History

I searched various libraries and encyclopaedias until I got materials about the Christian Ecumenical Councils, where Christian creeds, the dogmas, were formulated. I read about all the seven General Ecumenical Councils, paying special attention to the first four – the Council of Nicaea, of Constantinople, of Ephesus, and of Chalcedon.

I found that the Christian Council of Nicaea was convened under the Emperor Constantine the Great, and Pope Sylvester I, in the year 325. It debated the divinity of Christ; and, after fierce doctrinal disputation between the Alexandrian and Arian schools of thought, voted to declare Jesus as God, of the same substance (*homoooousios*) with the Father. The Council eventually formulated the Nicene Creed, repudiated Arianism and, under threat of banishment, forced many of those against the creed to endorse assent. Pope Sylvester I did not attend in person, but sent a strong delegation to endorse the council's decisions.

The Council of Constantinople was convened in 381 under Emperor Theodosius I and Pope Damase I. It created what was known as the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, which further developed and fine-tuned the Nicene Creed, by introducing the Holy Spirit into the Godhead, to complete the Trinity Doctrine. Thus, the Holy Spirit, believed to be the third Personality of the Godhead, emerged in the Trinity mix over 56 years after the Son had been conjoined with the Father!

The third Christian Ecumenical Council was held in Ephesus in the year 431, under Emperor Theodosius II and Pope Celestin I. It addressed the Christological controversy concerning the nature of the Christ. The council, which was presided over by Cyril of Alexandria, repudiated the teachings of Nestorius (the Patriarch of Constantinople), who had argued that Jesus had completely separate human and divine natures, both of which were valid. It

also proclaimed the Virgin Mary as the *Theotokos* (more commonly known as "Mother of God"), which was later repudiated by the Assyrian Church of the East.

The next council was that of Chalcedon in 451, under Emperor Martian and Pope Leo I. This council, urged by the Pope in his letter (the Tome), reversed its earlier decision on Nestorianism, by delineating two separate natures of Christ: divine and human. It formulated the Chalcedonian Creed in which Jesus was declared "truly God and truly man". This was the council that divided the Eastern (Oriental Orthodox) from the Western Churches. In addition, the council issued 27 disciplinary canons addressing church administration and authority.

The Church Council of Laodicea of 364 was non-ecumenical (synod), but it ordered that religious observances were to be held on Sundays, not Saturdays (Canon 29). It affirmed that Christians should not "judaise" by resting on the Sabath, but should honour the Lord's Day (declared as Sunday). Thus, Sunday became the new Sabbath, and Christians were free to work on Saturdays. This Council had a major impact on the development of the Christian Holy Book, as it commenced the process of compiling the Biblical Canon and forbade the reading of uncanonical books in churches (Canon 59).

Three other ecumenical councils were held in Nicaea and Constantinople. In all, there are 21 ecumenical councils recognised by the Catholic Church, as it held several other councils at Lateran, Lyon, Constance, Trent etc. The Eastern Orthodox Church recognises seven, while the Oriental Orthodox Churches accept only the first three. During these Councils, men vested divine authority on themselves, as they formulated and developed what would become the article of Christian orthodoxy.

Thus, I educated myself about how men voted for books that would make up their "Holy Book". They voted many to be doubtful, and declared others as having been inspired by the Holy Ghost! Undated books - written by nobody knew whom, nor when, nor where; collected by oral tradition (hearsay), after several intervening decades between the purported events and the time of writing - had become the Word of God, bestowed with unquestionable authority, and was to be known as "The Holy Bible"!

Furthermore, I read about the forgeries and interpolations carried out by the so-called Church fathers, some of whom later admitted that they had lied in honour of God! Little wonder, then, that the book so-compiled, packed with incredible tales, with little order or method, could only serve to foment divisions. The divisions in the early Church led to the bloodshed and savage massacres of the ignoble Crusade Era. For over a thousand years, early

Christians steeped the history of the world in blood, in the most malevolent doctrinal wars, crusades and Inquisition.

It was, indeed, a thing of joy to realise that I could no longer trust a book which erroneously informed me that the languages of the world started spontaneously when God became threatened by the exploits of puny human beings at the Tower of Babel. I could no longer trust a transmission that, not knowing what caused day and night, narrated the extremely ignorant story of how Joshua stopped the sun on its non-existent course around the Earth, in order to prolong day-light enough to complete his insane butchery of fellow humans!

Moreover, I had become tired of reading mythical tales of a talking serpent, a talking donkey (remember Shrek?), a floating iron; of a whale that swallowed Jonah; of the bush that wouldn't burn; of angels co-habiting with daughters of men; of dead, decomposing bodies coming out of their graves; of physical bodies and chariots of fire floating to heaven; and of a seemingly blood-thirsty God who, in a fit of anger, wiped out the entire earth in a world-wide flood (saving only eight). That would certainly win the crown of the greatest crime against humanity! Even Adolf Hitler would envy that achievement. Invariably, I became tired of Jehovah, the Jealous One, the terrible tribal God of Israel who ordained criminals as kings and called them men after his heart - what a heart!

I discussed my findings with members of the clergy. They excused the genocide, the atrocities, rape and murder carried out at the express command of their God by saying unctuously, "God works in mysterious ways!" In every way, the clergy sought to evade the facts, to dodge the truth, to preserve their creed. Anything they could not dodge, they swallowed. Yet in spite of their efforts, I had no love - not any more - for the Judeo-Christian God. He was so saving of mercy, so extravagant in murder, so anxious to kill, so ready to assassinate, that at his command, babies were butchered, women violated, and the white hair of aged men and women stained with blood. I was done with the Christian God. After many sleepless nights, I zoomed in on the critical question: where would I turn to next?

My Forays into Other Paths

At that juncture, the pertinent question, at least for me, became: could there be a true Word of God out there? Perhaps, I was in a wrong religion and others had the true faith. My search, as a seeker, had begun. I combed the teachings of Jehovah's Witnesses, reading many of their books, including their main text, *You Can Live Forever in a Paradise on Earth*. Then I

read *The Science of Self Realisation* by A.C. Bhaktivedanta Prabhupada - a text of the Hare Krishna Movement. I read other "Sacred Scriptures": *the Vedas, Upanishads, the Bhagavad-Gita As It Is*, *The Srimad Bhagavatam* and the *Tripitaka*. *The Quran* and the *Book of Mormons* were not left out.

Much later, I enrolled for a mystical course in Buddhism, and read numerous books and magazines of the Ancient Mystical Order of the Rossi Crucis (AMORC). The mystical books of Lobsang Rampa did not escape my attention; neither did those of White Eagle Brotherhood of the United States. I did not spare the fabulous *Lost Books of the Bible* and the mythical *Forgotten Books of Eden*. I ventured into Scientology, and also into the *Analects* of Confucius. I pored over avalanche of books on the "saviours" or avatars of mankind, including those on Mithra, Zoroaster, Buddha, Confucius, Horus, Osiris, Krishna, Baldur, Bramah, Vishnu, Arjuna, and several modern-day Masters or Teachers. I employed my love of reading to great effect.

Next, I examined the works of great Philosophers and Thinkers – old and modern. I read about Socrates, about Plato, and Diogenes. I studied Thomas Paine, including his classical work, *The Age of Reason*. I became absorbed with the controversial works of Charles Darwin, and I read his popular "Origin of Species" and "The Descent of Man". Bertrand Russell fascinated me, so did Herbert Spencer. I found the works of Burns, Volney, Laplace and Humboldt compelling. I was enlightened by Robert Ingersoll, mystified by Cains Smith, dazed by James Frazer; and I became an acquaintance of Richard Dawkins through his works.

A Major Turning Point

Let me now revisit an experience I had during the Easter holidays of 1988. It was a life-changing experience.

It was the Good Friday, 1 April 1988. A newspaper article titled, "Judas Iscariot: Guilty or not Guilty" had caught my attention. Reading through the article, I found the author's thesis quite interesting. The author had argued that, since the primary purpose of the coming of Jesus was to die for the sins of the world, those who killed him and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him, should have been regarded as heroes of the Christian Faith. He contended that such characters carried out a necessary service for our salvation, and there was no point in accepting the sacrifice while hypocritically condemning those who made it possible. Such a gesture would be similar to condemning the priests who performed sacrificial offerings during the period of the Old Testament.

I felt intrigued. Here was an author who dared to question long-held traditions of the Church, raising questions capable of opening new

perspectives on what other believers seemed to have taken for granted. I also felt some relief because I realised that I wasn't alone in being doubtful of Biblical dogmas. So, I wasn't abnormal after all! I took the article to my dad in the hope of engaging him in some of the thought-provoking issues raised therein. He wasn't in the mood, as he dismissed me with, "Look, Tunde, I don't have your time today. We should be in solemn, grateful mood, not a questioning one."

Naturally, I wasn't satisfied with being pushed aside. So, I took the article with me to church on Easter Sunday and sought the opinion of some of my friends. Sola Adeyegbe (remember him?) was excited.

"The questions and doubts raised in the article are worthy of deep contemplation. I used to be bothered by similar questions, but not anymore," he stated calmly.

"That's really interesting. How did you resolve them?" I desperately needed to know.

"Okay, not to worry. Let's have a lunch-time contemplation meeting in my house tomorrow, Easter Monday. I'll invite a few other deep thinkers to join us."

His words were music to my ears. This was an opportunity to engage with like-minded individuals on matters of faith that had always bothered me. I joyfully accepted his invite.

Monday couldn't come fast enough. Apart from Sola and I, Seyi Adeyemi and a couple of other friends joined the contemplation meeting. During the ensuing discussion, most of the participants admitted that the issue of the role played by Judas had been a mind-boggling one, in view of its necessity for the vicarious sacrifice of Jesus.

Seyi intervened, quoting Matthew 26:24, where Jesus pronounced woe on Judas for the betrayal: "I don't think there's any doubt over the culpability of Judas in the killing of Christ. He's guilty as charged. Jesus himself condemned him, remember?"

The arguments went back and forth, without anyone being able to explain the seeming irrationality of accepting a sacrifice while condemning those who facilitated it. In all these, I noticed Sola was silent. I insisted on knowing his views on the matter. He obliged my request. His comment was an eye opener. Hear him:

"The confusion on this subject has come about due to our assumption that the Lord Jesus came to die for the sins of the world. What if he didn't come to die? What if he brought salvation to us in his Word? What if mankind burdened itself with greater guilt by killing the Son of God? What if it was not the purpose of God that his Son be killed in that manner? Go and re-read the parable of the

wicked husbandmen who killed the son of the vineyard owner (Luke 20:9-19). Were they not guilty? Did the vineyard owner send his son to be killed? Is the story not figuratively a reference to Jesus and his mission? … Once you get the right perspective that Jesus did not come purposely to die, you'll find that the confusion disappears."

His views opened a can of worms. Heated argument followed. How can the son of a pastor assert that Jesus' mission was not to come and die? Was anyone in doubt regarding the purpose of Jesus' death on the Cross? At least two people vehemently contested the idea, arguing that, rather than clear our doubts, the explanation offered by Sola would create bigger doubts and make things worse.

For me, Sola had just opened my eyes to a new perspective – a perspective which I felt was worth considering. Was it even remotely possible that Jesus' earthly mission was not to die for our sins? Had we been wrong in our article of faith all along? What if Sola was right? How did such an idea occur to him anyway? I wasn't willing to jettison the thought. I must find out more from him, but I could sense that the atmosphere was no longer conducive for probing further. Some fundamentalist views were being aired now. It was my turn to be silent.

As was usually the case on such occasions, our contemplation meeting came to an end without a consensus. I stayed behind after everyone else had left. I needed to probe further into Sola's intriguing view.

"Where did these your unconventional views emanate from?" I asked him as soon as we were alone.

"Have you ever read or heard about an enlightening book: *In the Light of Truth – The Grail Message*?" He volunteered.

"No. Please tell me."

"It's a book that answers all questions about life and human existence," he explained, his face brightening up. "I can see you're a seeker after Truth. If you're in earnest, I could give you the first volume of the Message."

I left his house about an hour later with a copy of Volume 1 of the Grail Message.

Within a week, I had devoured all the thirty-four chapters contained in the first volume. I found it a compelling read. I returned that volume and requested for the remaining two. I pleaded with Sola to let me have both because I had to return to my PPA in Benue, promising to keep the books in good shape until my return. He refused. He was only willing to release the book a volume at a time. So, I got only Volume 2, which contained sixty-three

chapters. I got to read the Volume 3 after completing my youth service. The experience was a great turning point in my quest for the Ultimate Truth.

"And the Light Shineth in Darkness"

Within the context of a belief in reincarnation, the Grail Message brought clarity into most of the questions that had befuddled my mind in the last two decades. I received enlightenment about the immutable laws of sowing and reaping and of spiritual gravitation, and the understanding that nothing in life happened by chance. All that was required of me was to give God the honour of perfection. At talks and contemplative meetings, everyone was encouraged to ask any questions about life, existence and creation in general, and answers would be provided *in the Light of Truth*. Moreover, the Message provided what I saw as the missing link in the Creation versus Evolution debate.

Somehow, word soon got around in the church that Sola and I had joined a "secret cult" called the Grail Movement. It was unthinkable! At that time, I hadn't even joined the movement but I was well on the way, as I had attended a Seekers' Weekend on Grailland. The experience I had during the weekend, coupled with the ones gained by attending talks based on the Message were so enthralling and so clarifying that I had made up my mind that it was the path for me.

Naturally, the church leadership felt concerned that the two most prominent leaders of YMCA (the President and the Secretary General) were "going astray" and were capable of influencing a number of the church youths. The church had to act before things got out of hands, otherwise rebellion against the church could be in the offing. That was their perception, wrong as it was; but how many people could you begin to explain the reality to? What followed their fear was nothing short of an Inquisition.

I was out of Lagos on the weekend of the Inquisition. My good friend, Niyi, had lost his mum, and I travelled to Ilesa with the family for the burial ceremony. On my return that Sunday night, I noticed the sombre mood in the house. Before I could turn in for the night, Dad summoned me.

"I've never felt this ashamed in my life," he started an outburst. "I was a sorry sight at Board meeting today. What you have done by joining the Grail Movement is something more shameful for me than if you had been caught robbing people! How dare you?"

I'd always known that the day of such a clash would come. I tried to explain but words failed me. Dad went on to explain how the Board of Pastors and Elders had summoned Sola and me to face an inquiry in the hope that they would succeed in convincing us to retrace our footsteps and remain in

the fold of Christ. Sola faced the Board, but as I was out of town, the District Overseer had requested that I report to him the following evening. Dad now wanted to know what my response to the Overseer was going to be.

"I would simply tell him the truth…" I started but was interrupted.

"And what is the truth?"

"That yes, I'm a member of the Grail Movement."

Dad was extremely furious. His eyes turned red literally. He boomed in a voice I could not recognise: "You dare not. If you do that, I would disown you as my son!"

The die was cast. I knew I was going to dare my dad, and I was ready for whatever consequences would follow. I left him without any further remark.

The following evening, I honoured the invitation of Pastor Alokan, the District Overseer. He welcomed me into his apartment in the Mission House. On his enquiry, I confirmed to him that I was a member of the Grail Movement, but asserted that it was not a secret cult, as they had feared. Thereafter, he asked me a lot of questions about the Message's stand on God, the Mission of Jesus, Holy Spirit, human salvation, Judgement Day, among others. I answered all his questions honestly.

Pastor Alokan expressed the pastors and elders' collective concern that two of the church's most influential youths were romancing "strange teachings" that could lead us and others out of the path of salvation. He made it clear that Sola and I could not continue to hold our positions as Interpreters or as President and Secretary General of YMCA respectively. The choice was ours; it was going to be either the church or the Grail Movement, not both. He concluded by giving me two weeks within which to have a rethink and return to him with my decision. I knew it would come to this.

"I don't need two weeks, Sir. I'd already made my choice," I told him.

"Yes?"

"I choose the Grail Movement. I don't mind leaving the church."

"In that case, put your decision in writing." If he was surprised at my decision, he didn't show it.

"Sir, with due respect, I do not intend to put anything in writing. I did not become a member of the church by filling any application form. I will simply withdraw, henceforth, from all church activities."

"Okay then. Tell your father to see me before the end of the week."

As I withdrew from the presence of the Overseer. I felt nothing but relief, even triumph. It was as if a huge burden had been lifted off my shoulders. I knew that there was going to be a mighty showdown at home. Up until now, Dad had always had his way with key decisions in that house. Now, it was going to be different. This was my life, my decision, not his. Mentally, I even prepared for the possibility of being kicked out of the house. I looked up: it was a starless night. Dark, ominous clouds were gathering. Heading home, I braced myself for the storm ahead.

CHAPTER 10: TROUBLE IN PARADISE

"There is something feeble and a little contemptible about a man who cannot face the perils of life without the help of comfortable myths. Almost inevitably, some part of him is aware that they are myths and that he believes them only because they are comforting. But he dare not face this thought. Moreover, since he is aware, however dimly, that his opinions are not real, he becomes furious when they are disputed." ~ Bertrand Russell

The front doorbell rang persistently. Mum answered. As soon as she opened the door, everyone knew that there was trouble. It was Dad. He had just returned from seeing the Overseer. From my room, I could hear Mum's plea.

"D.A. Please take it easy," she said, calling Dad by his initials.

"Your son has just brought shame unto our family. He has rubbished the good name we've cherished and enjoyed over the years. Where is he?"

I calmly stepped out of my room to face the brewing storm. The person I saw wasn't my dad. I could hardly recognise him. His face had become badly contorted with rage.

Dad continued, still fuming, "How could you tell Pastor Alokan you'll leave the church? How could you dare to abandon your calling for a youthful whim? How dare you?"

"I have no choice. I am more concerned about truth than religion, but I…"

"Shut that mouth of yours or I'll shut it for you!" Dad interrupted. "Truth? Outside of Christianity? Abomination! Do you realise what you're talking about?"

"Look Dad, let's have a conversation over this matter." I pleaded.

"There's no room for conversation. You're going back to the church. I have made that promise to the Overseer. And you know me. That is final!" Dad announced, his voice shaking with fury, as he stormed into his room.

That was only the beginning of what was a massive tempest in our home. The trouble that had been brewing for a while had now broken out in paradise. I considered how my dad had worked himself up over the vexed issue of my leaving the church. I felt pity for him. He was fighting a lost battle. Couldn't he see that I needed conviction, not threat? That the decision was mine, not his? Deep within me, I knew nothing would take me back to the church. I had had enough of that pretentious life, pretending to believe what I had come to abhor. I felt gratitude to Pastor Alokan for drawing the line for me. I had crossed that line now, happily too. There was no going back. And that, for me, was final!

The next morning. The bell that normally summoned the family to the morning devotion tolled at 5.30 am. I decided, against my better judgement, to attend the family devotion. Everyone had gathered in the living room, except Leke who had remained in Kano after his youth service, having been employed by the accounting firm he served with. I was the last to take my seat. Instead of starting with a hymn, as was the norm, Dad decided to commence that devotion with an announcement.

"You're all aware of the recent sad development in this house. The devil wants to snatch one of us. We will not allow it. I'm commencing a 30-day prayer and fasting aimed at frustrating the devices of Satan in this house. Those of you who feel led may join the exercise."

He paused as if waiting for some kind of response. When he realised that no response was forthcoming, he continued.

"From today until further notice, Tunde should cease joining our family prayers, morning or night. As he has confessed another faith, his presence can easily be a stumbling block to our prayers. We don't want that."

After the announcement, Dad turned his face in my direction. I didn't know if he wanted me to make a defence or comply with his directive without question. I decided the latter was the better option. I withdrew from the family devotion that morning; and it was for good. I felt relieved. Once again, a preferred choice had been thrust upon me. Thank goodness!

External Interventions

Two uneasy weeks dragged slowly by, during which I tried the best I could to stay off the path of everyone. My talkative tendency was reduced considerably. I returned from work and met Pastor Akeju in the house. He was the immediate past Vicar-in-Charge of CAC, Olorunsogo. He had left the church and was pastoring another, but had remained a close friend of the family. He seemed happy to see me and did not waste any time in telling me he had been briefed concerning my feud with the church. He asked if I could come to his house the following Saturday, to have a discussion on the matter. I promised to oblige his request.

Pastor Akeju. Here was someone, at last, who was willing to have a conversation with me on why I decided to leave the church. Almost every church leader had assumed that I was possessed by some demon, and that my heart had become hardened for no just cause. Here was someone who was different; someone willing to listen to me. Here was an invitation to present my own side of the argument.

At the scheduled meeting on Saturday, I had the opportunity of raising the issues that sowed the seeds of doubt in my mind. I concluded by telling him that I left the church mainly because I had stopped believing in the Bible as the Word of God, and that I couldn't just continue living a lie. I also explained how the Grail Message had filled in the gaps for me by giving me the conviction I had been craving over the years.

His response was an anti-climax. Pastor Akeju made no attempt to defend any of the church dogmas that I attacked. He did all the patient listening only to tell me that God was preparing me for a greater mission and wanted me to acquire knowledge elsewhere, so that I could become a vastly experienced preacher of the Gospel of Christ. What? Did this man listen to me at all? I was expecting a robust defence of Christianity, especially from those who, like him, had spent years in Seminary College. It was not to be. The Pastor even ended our session with what I considered an insult: "They do nothing at Grailland, Iju, except worship flowers. I'll continue to pray for you."

Within the next few weeks, there were several other interventions from pastors, evangelists and teachers. Some of such interventionists included: Pastor Olatunde (the CAC Olorunsogo Resident Pastor), Pastor Titiloye (the Church Patron), and Pastors Adeyanju (Dad of a friend) and Josu (a neighbour). Others were Evangelists Olawepo (remember him?), Olagbenro and Abiodun, as well as concerned elders of the church, like Elders Taiwo (YMCA Patron), Ojo and Ilori. Family friends, like Mrs Titiloye, Mrs Adeyegbe and Mrs Andre also gave it a shot. I was not moved, as all I got were empty platitudes.

It didn't cease to amuse me that only one of these interventionists even made any attempt at trying to address the critical issues that made me leave. You probably guessed right: Evangelist Olawepo. He acknowledged the politics, the voting and the brute force through which Christianity's most important creeds were formulated. We had to part ways when he asserted that he believed God guided the process every step of the way. As for God's killings, especially of innocent children in the Bible, his "God works in mysterious ways" explanation fell short of expectation. On the whole, I found his attempted answers extremely unsatisfactory.

But why didn't the others even make any attempt at defending their creed? The obvious answer was that they had no answers. Like most people, even the so-called religious leaders had accepted their faith and creeds uncritically. It had been hammered into them from childhood that matters of God were not to be questioned. The Grail Message described such people as "believers merely out of habit". Like most people, they had been indoctrinated from infancy. They had become afraid to think through or question any of their beliefs. Critical thinking was an anathema. Just believe - therein lay their faith; and for that, our paths parted.

Well, good for them, but certainly not for me. Such unquestioning attitude provided fertile grounds for various contradictory religions to thrive, and it's quite shocking that no one seemed to care if what they held was really true. For me, belief must become conviction. I must question everything that didn't make sense, otherwise it would not give me the deep roots necessary to make my faith come alive. How else could I be certain that I wasn't just propagating falsehood, especially in the face of better alternatives?

The Rift Deepens

Over the next few days, Dad tried, on several occasions, to cajole me into reaccepting the Christian Faith.

"This your recalcitrant behaviour is strange. This is not you. My son, what have those wicked people done to you? What have they given you to eat?"

"Nothing. Just answers to my unanswered questions. Nothing more".

"Okay, if you agree to return to the church and take up your role again as an interpreter, I promise I'll buy you a car."

"Oh, is it now a business deal, rather than a matter of truth?" was the response I uttered, which made him even angrier.

"You're just being incorrigible."

He followed it with some unprintable words that deserve to be forgotten. Despite my effort to the contrary, I never forgot them. Besides, he soon directed that I was not to partake in the family meals. I was asked to source my meals independently of whatever was cooked in the house. Clearly, I needed some refuge, some consolation, someone to comfort me. I left home and paid a visit to the Longes. Mrs Longe was the Leader of the Victoria Island Circle of the Grail Movement. I had briefed the Longe family on my travails at home. I received quite some words of comfort from them. I was grateful. I soon became a regular visitor at the Longes. On at least one of such visits, Sola came with me.

One Saturday morning, amidst the growing schism at the home front, I woke up early. As I didn't have to partake in the family devotion, I decided to embark on my second reading of The Grail Message. Just as I started, my room door opened. It was Dad. He seemed somewhat excited. He told me he had prayed all night for my sake, and that God had assured him all would be well. Being in a praise worship mood, he started singing the popular song, "Jesus power, Super power; *babalawo* power, powerless power," and he invited me to sing along. After singing together a couple of times, Dad suddenly changed

the second leg of the song to, "Abdrushin power, powerless power". Abdrushin was the Bringer of the Grail Message. I refused to sing any further. That was when all hell broke loose!

Twack! A slap landed on my face! His hand came fast at me, taking me unawares. The second was descending rapidly. I held his hands, both hands. He struggled to get his hands free to continue the assault, but couldn't. Other family members rushed in and separated us.

"You must sing it with me" Dad insisted, getting unduly worked up again.

I kept mute.

"All these useless books you're reading have turned you against God. It's not going to happen in my house."

He grabbed the book on my table. He left, returned a short while later and packed about half the books on my bookshelf, including all Grail publications, as well as my Hare Krishna and Lopsang Rampa collections. He left only Christian publications. My first impulse was to stop him but I decided against it. I felt I should have known better than leaving those books on my open shelf. He turned to me.

"You're never going to see those books again. I will burn them. You ungrateful son!" he yelled.

I kept mute but remained on guard. I wasn't ready to receive another slap. Books could always be replaced.

He returned again. I rose from my bed. What again? I regretted that the room had no key. Dad's eyes were blazing hot as if overheated coals were burning in them. I was most unprepared for the vituperations that followed.

"I hate you! I regret ever giving birth to you. I won't live with this regret for ever. I will disown you." He uttered other unprintable words before leaving. Since cajolery had failed, he had now turned to threats.

Exasperated, I felt it was time to start giving serious consideration to my getting a place of my own, so that peace could once again return to the home of Elder Daniel Adeyemi Aina. At that point, the words attributed to Jesus in the Bible kept ringing in my ears: *"Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother…; and one's foes will be members of one's own household."* (Matthew 10: 34-36).

Another Great Turning Point

Right in the midst of the crisis, someone came to the house from Grailland Administration Office, with a letter for me. It was about mid-day on a Sunday; and since I was still savouring my break from the church, I was alone at home. Just as I suspected, the letter was Grail Movement's response to my membership application. The Movement conveyed the approval for me to become a Crossbearer and become "sealed to the Light" at the September Grail Festival. It was the best news of the year. My joy knew no bounds. Then, something else dawned on me.

What if the letter had been brought when I wasn't at home? What if it had been delivered right into my dad's hands? Dad would have realised that, despite all my struggles, I hadn't even joined the Grail Movement. He would have gladly destroyed the letter without telling me anything. Without receiving the acceptance slip from me, the Movement would have assumed that I had changed my mind, and was no longer interested. I shuddered from the contemplation of that possibility. What a lucky break that my letter of approval was delivered right into my hands!

A problem reared its head; it seemed intractable at first thought. How would I attend a three-day Grail Festival under the riotous situation at home? What if another trouble broke out on any of the days of the Festival? What would I do in the presence of a dad who was bent on frustrating my efforts in that regard? That same day, an idea occurred to me: I went to seek Sola's advice. He had returned from Grailland. He congratulated me profusely. He also addressed my problem.

"I'm sorry about your situation at home. You can come and stay with me for the period of the Festival. That is, if you don't mind."

"Mind? Why would I mind? I love it. You're simply God-sent. Thank you."

And that was that. Problem solved.

The Festival represented my highest spiritually-uplifting moments. I was awash in goose bumps. I revelled every bit of it. All my troubles seemed to drain off me. I felt elated and proud, very proud, of becoming a Crossbearer. I was now surrounded by people of like minds. At Grail contemplative meetings, I could ask any questions, raise any doubts, and air my deepest thoughts without fear of sanction. Besides, the warmth and serenity of Grailland was something refreshingly astounding. Here was home.

Leaving the House

Less than a month after the Festival, my mood became soiled once again. I had summoned the courage to start attending Grail Hour of Worship

from the house. It went well initially, and I was even surprised Dad took it in his stride when he got to know. But not for long.

"Where do you think you're going?" His question came from the blues.

"Grailland for Worship" was my response.

"Not in this house!" It was more of a shout. He continued, "Look, Tunde, don't think I'm a fool. There can't be two captains in the same ship. Since you're claiming to be man enough to take your own decisions, you should at least be man enough to move to your own house."

"This is my father's house. Why not go to your own father's house?"

I had intended that statement as a joke but it fell flat. I saw Dad's hand flash up. I ducked, right on time.

"I'm giving you one month to pack your things and leave my house. You have no place here anymore. And, I'm not joking."

I now had a one-month deadline to leave the house. I started a house-search in earnest. I tried to get a one-bedroom flat to no avail; only two or three-bedroom flats were available around Beecham or Shogunle area. I dared not move closer to Lagos Island where rents were too prohibitive. I had enough money to pay one year rent for a 2-bedroom apartment. The problem was that those shylock landlords wanted a minimum of two-year rent. I approached Castro, my Chess buddy, who had been on the lookout for a new accommodation. Unfortunately, he didn't have enough money. He was looking for a room, not a flat.

Time was running out. Dad kept bugging me about leaving. December came. I'd never believed in a childhood superstition about December being a month of miracles. No, not the miracle of Jesus' birth; it's the notion that a special dispensation of God brought miraculous interventions into many people's lives in December. With or without my belief, I did experience a miraculous intervention regarding my house search. This was what happened.

I had gone to pay Niyi a visit that December as Christmas approached. Without having discussed my accommodation problem with him. He threw a proposition right on my lap.

"Sister Funmi and her husband have just moved out of their Festac quarters: they've moved to a bigger apartment in Surulere. Since you're a civil servant, would you be interested in moving to government staff quarters?"

"Interested? I'm in earnest about moving out of my father's house. Government quarters! That's God-sent. When would it be available?" I was ecstatic.

"It's already empty. Let me bring you the keys." He went into his room and returned with the keys.

"There you are: it's a two-bedroom flat at 21 Road, M Close, Festac Town. You've been there before now, when we both visited Sister Funmi, remember?"

"Yes indeed. Thanks a million!"

My main headache had been miraculously solved.

Immediately after the 1993 New Year holidays, I moved into the Festac apartment. My brothers helped me with the movement. Shortly before my departure, I received a jolt from Leke.

"Could you leave me a copy of the Grail Message before you leave?"

"For what?" I looked at him dubiously.

"I want to read it. I want to see what's so special about that book that you got so carried away. Is that too much to ask?"

I was glad to oblige his request.

Before finally leaving, I had to get all my books that Dad had confiscated. I could hear my heartbeats, as I searched his room for the books. He wasn't home, of course. Could he have burnt them, as he had threatened? I knew it wasn't likely but I couldn't be sure. Finding the books packed in a carton in his wardrobe was a big relief. He hadn't burnt them; he had only kept them for me. What a sweet dad! Festac, here I come.

CHAPTER 11: A NEW CAPITAL CITY BECKONS

"Motion is the main commandment for everything that lies in this Creation, for Creation developed out of motion, and is maintained and renewed by motion." ~ Abd-ru-shin

Festival Town

It was on movement to my own apartment that I realised the enormity of what it took to set up a home. Furniture acquisition was a daunting project on its own. Luckily, I had already purchased a TV and video player set about a year earlier. Well, everything had its own time and place… just develop a list of all your needs and start acquiring them in order of priority, I told myself.

Months later, things had taken a much better shape. They became easier when, on Leke's suggestion, we moved in together. Following a religious riot that broke out in Kano in 1992, he had sought and got another job (with International Funding Services) in Lagos, thereby avoiding having to return to his erstwhile job in Kano. I really didn't think living alone would have been much fun. It wasn't for nothing that they say "two heads are better than one."

Mum soon came visiting. She expressed deep regrets at the developments in the house and our parting of ways in less than cordial circumstances. Surprisingly, she apologised for playing along with Dad regarding his discriminatory directives like my exclusion from eating in the house. She also expressed her personal decision in words that were positively mind-searing.

"Go where you will and be whatever you will. You'll always, always be my son. Nothing will change my love for you."

I was deeply moved by those words, so moved I started shedding tears.

"Thank you, Mum. I would remain eternally grateful for your unconditional love."

I got up and gave her a huge hug as the tears flowed freely from both sides. I felt that was the way it ought to be: parental love for their children should always be unconditional.

Of Love, Confusion and Indecision

Things started moving very fast, both at the office and home fronts. Being selected to participate in a number of out-of-station assignments soon brought some financial relief my way. It became easier to acquire most needs, even wants, with something to spare. I served as the Secretary to a Ministerial

Urban Renewal Committee for Satellite Town. On submission of our report, the Honourable Minister was very impressed by our work. So impressed was he that he directed that part of the land recovered from Satellite Town during the renewal exercise be allocated to all the committee members, as a token of his appreciation for the good job. A plot of land each as token for a committee assignment! I got mine, of course. So, hard-work could really yield dividends? I was ecstatic!

Leke soon got a car. It made things easier, especially for our weekend outings. Then the pressure started – the pressure to get married, coming mostly from extended family members. They wondered what we were waiting for, as they felt that once you secured a job after university graduation, marriage should be the next item on your agenda. The fact that my elder brother was still a bachelor shielded me from any such pressure, at least initially. Leke made it clear that if I was ready for marriage, I could go ahead. I answered him with a crypt "marriage is the last thing on my mind right now", and I meant it.

Perhaps the situation would have been different if I had kept up my relationship with Marrie Nguda. Marrie was a Senegalese girl I had dated for about two years, after our first meeting at Sister Bimbo's wedding in 1990. We didn't rush anything as she was still an undergraduate at the time. After her graduation, we had thought we would start contemplating marriage, if all went well. And that was the big "if" that was hardly ever fulfilled. We had to breakup after two years, due mainly to our constant disagreements over management of finances.

With a certain nostalgic feeling, I recalled how Dad had once questioned why I was still dating Marrie. He told me he would not have in-laws that couldn't speak his language. I retorted that I didn't see how language could be a barrier to marriage, especially since none of the parents on both sides was an illiterate. However, he only put his mind at rest when I assured him that Marrie and I were not contemplating marriage, at least, not yet. Had I told him I was contemplating marrying Marrie, I was almost certain that my decision would have led to my first major clash with Dad, as it preceded my leaving the church to join the Grail Movement. Thereafter, I didn't have any major relationship again until Ifeoma (Ify) came along.

Ify really swept me off my feet. Everyone thought I had met my wife. Some family and friends urged me to go ahead and tie the nuptial knots with her. We had dated for over a year when, sometime in 1995, she suddenly changed her attitude. She started avoiding me, without telling me what the problem was. My enquiry as to what the problem was always met with "nothing". As I wasn't the type to keep pestering anyone, I let her be. We had a break that lasted about two months before she suddenly showed up again at my doorstep only to throw me a bolt from the blue.

"Tunde, I've been feeling quite uneasy about your membership of Grail Movement. A neighbour told me it's a secret cult where members in black outfits always worship yellow flowers, and that my life could be in danger. That's why I'd been avoiding you. I'm sorry."

"So, why are you sorry, and why are you here now?"

"I'm sorry because, after doing an independent investigation, I found out that those allegations were all lies, and I now feel very stupid for allowing myself to be so misled."

By mid-1996, I had proposed marriage to Ify, and she happily accepted. We agreed to take the next step in December when she was to go and inform her parents in Udi, Enugu State, about our proposed marriage plans. It was not to be. Unknown to me, her misgivings about the Grail Movement continued. Nothing in her outward attitude betrayed her continued mistrust until, one day, I received another jolt from her.

"Before we proceed with our marriage plans, I need to know if you truly love me." She announced with a beautiful smile that made it impossible for me to know what she had in mind.

"How do you propose to do that?" I asked, intrigued.

"If you truly love me …" She hesitated, then continued, "If you really love me enough to want to marry me, you'll not pick the Grail Message over me."

"Meaning?"

"You should choose between the Grail Message and me. When I come back here next weekend, I'll be glad to know that you can drop out of the Grail Movement for my sake, even if you don't go back to the church. I just don't think I can be married to a Crossbearer."

The silence that followed was so palpable you could have grabbed it in an embrace. The words of Pastor Alokan, giving me two weeks to decide between remaining in the church and leaving the Grail Movement, came rushing back. Why do some people presume they could blackmail others to get what they want? This was the same issue regarding which my dad and I had quarrelled bitterly. Now, it was the turn of my fiancée to draw an "either/or" line. She least expected my response.

"Thanks for letting me know how you feel before it's too late. You don't have to leave it till next weekend because another week wouldn't change anything. You may leave now. I don't easily succumb to blackmail. This relationship is over!" I planted what I intended to be a goodbye kiss on her forehead.

Even now, I still struggle to understand what followed. Ify sat down for a while, her head held in her palms. When she looked at me again, I could only see a mixture of surprise and confusion on her face. Then, rather unexpectedly, she burst into tears.

"I'm sorry, I don't want to leave you. I love you and I'll marry you with or without Grail Message. I didn't know what pushed me into giving you that condition. Please forgive me. I love you."

It was now my turn to be confused. I tried to understand what was going on. Which one did she really mean? There would be no point in our going ahead with marriage plans if my wife-to-be could not trust me completely. I had no intention of asking her to accept the Grail Message or join the Movement. She would be completely free to practise her religion as a Catholic. She would also be free to take the children to church with her, if she preferred it that way. I had assured her of all these in previous conversations, yet she felt unsatisfied. What should I do now?

We resolved to continue seeing each other; but the truth was that things were never really the same again. Her mistrust seemed to have driven a wedge between us. It stalled our marriage plans. December came and went. We spent Christmas together in Lagos. None of us raised the issue of her going home to notify her parents again. It was as if we had never made any such plan. From then on, I started nursing serious doubts about the possibility of transmuting our relationship into a marital one. That was even before the country's relocation of its capital city to Abuja dealt a final blow to our tottering relationship.

Movement to Abuja

Preparations had started in earnest about movement of the headquarters of all federal ministries and agencies to Abuja. I was making preparations for our relocation to Abuja, but Ify wasn't. She said she'd rather remain in Lagos. My attempt to convince her that she'd need to be in the headquarters to remain relevant in her office, fell on deaf ears.

The Ministry soon released the list of those approved for relocation to Abuja. Part of the relocation allowance was to be paid prior to departure. While some officers were happy for being excluded from the list, others felt terribly disappointed. One of my colleagues, named Mugu, had hoped to be part of the movement, to be closer to his family in Kagoro, in the southern part of Kaduna State. His hopes were dashed. I went with him to the DD-Budget, Dr Metuh, to explain the importance of his joining the relocation team. It was agreed that, if Mugu could use his personal resources for the initial relocation, a reimbursement could be arranged for him in due course.

That was how I was relocated by my Ministry to Abuja in February, 1997. I left without Ify. I had never been the type of person appreciative of a long-distance relationship. So, at my departure, I had serious doubts about our marriage prospects.

"Where is Ify?" Mugu ventured to ask me, on our arrival in Abuja.

"She has decided to stay back in Lagos. I believe she has her reasons for taking that alternative."

Well, did she realise that the separation could jeopardise your marriage plans?"

"Life must go on, whatever happens." I concluded.

In Abuja, I passed my first two nights in the quarters of an old friend, Akomolafe, who was the Head of Administration in the Ministry's Abuja Field Office. We had been assured, before leaving Lagos, that the Ministry had already procured Abuja accommodation for those on the approved relocation list. The situation we met on ground was different.

"Sorry, the accommodation available within the city isn't enough, so it's been reserved for only Management staff, from GL 14 and above. Accommodation has been secured for the rest of you in one of three neighbouring towns: Kuje, Keffi and Suleija," announced Dr. Metuh unceremoniously.

"How far away are these towns?" Anya, another of my colleagues, asked.

"No idea. A driver will take you there when you're ready. We have been assured that staff buses would be available for your daily commute to the office from each of those locations."

I brightened up. "Okay then, I'm ready now." I turned to Mugu and Anya, "Shall we?"

Anya declined. He wasn't ready. Mugu and I proceeded. We were later joined by a staff from the Legal Unit. He was a labour union official, simply referred to as Chairman.

Sojourn in Keffi

We eventually settled for the accommodation provided at Keffi. All three of us settled for a three-bedroom bungalow in the part of Keffi called Angwa Kaje, close to Keffi Super Cinema. Supplies Division also moved most of its staff to Keffi. Daily commuting brought us together in the staff bus. I soon became friends with Hassan, IK, Quadri, Monday (La Mondi), Lizzy, Opurum, Joy and other jolly colleagues brought together to live at Keffi.

Contrary to my fears, evening life at Keffi turned out to be quite exciting. There was a military barracks and quite a number of joints where one could relax after a hard day's work. It was almost inevitable to visit the cinema or any of the relaxation joints regularly, otherwise loneliness would be your companion every evening. Who wanted that? Besides, eating out was a lot easier than doing kitchen chores. The situation remained the same until Lilian came to my rescue. Lilian was a friend who worked as an administrative staff at the Wuse General Hospital. I had met her through Lizzy.

"Why would you even contemplate eating out on a regular basis?" Lilian had asked me during one of our outings.

"It's not as if I have much of a choice. It's not fun cooking for just myself, with all the associated troubles?"

"Which troubles? You guys talk of cooking as if it's one humongous task!"

"It's certainly humongous."

"Not for me. I enjoy cooking."

"Maybe you can help me in that department?"

"Why not. If I'm invited."

"You're hereby invited."

On the office front, activities were picking up. We were busy collecting and collating data for 1997 Half-Year Budget Review. In Budget Division, working late became a regular affair, which meant missing the staff bus. Our complaints made the Ministry include purchase of mini-busses in the 1997 Supplementary Budget for both Budget and Supplies Divisions. I complained to my boss that our need to work long hours would be greatly reduced if we could computerise our budgeting system. It was seen as a great idea which had to wait until the following year's Budget. In the interim, I had the use of my boss' official car whenever we worked late.

My Saturdays were usually spent either visiting my friends in the city to watch Premiership or going for a game of *Tombola* in the evening. Another place worth visiting on Saturdays was the School of Preliminary Studies (which later became upgraded to Nasarawa State University), Keffi. There were usually enough activities to add excitement to your weekend. Sundays were even better, as by the time I returned from the Grail Worship Hour at Zuba, the day was already half gone. I missed Ify but I had no plans of going to Lagos until December, which suddenly seemed too far away.

On a weekend visit to one of my friends at our quarters in Agwan NEPA, sounds of quarrel emanated from one of the adjoining rooms.

"Are those our staff quarrelling in your neighbourhood?" I asked my hostess, Rose.

"No. They are the former occupants who have overstayed their quit date," she replied.

"So, what is the Ministry doing about it?"

"The room has already been allocated to one of our staff in Supplies. So, my neighbours' quarrelsome days are numbered."

"Good. You know who is coming in?"

"Not yet. It's a certain Store Officer named Helen."

I regarded Rose, my eyebrows lifted, "Would that be Helen Emevu from the Toll Gates Management Committee?"

"Yes. You know her?"

"I certainly do."

So, Helen Emevu was coming to Abuja. While Rose was busy in the kitchen, I went into a flashback mode. I had met Helen when I was on an ad-hoc assignment as the Personal Assistant to the Chairman of the Toll Gate Management Committee in Lagos. It was December, 1995. We were extremely busy, working round the clock, doing end of "Financial Year" work, and literally sleeping in our office at the Ojota Toll Gate. On the third night of the work, Tola, the Secretary, entered the Chairman's office while I was there.

"One of our store personnel has gone mad, Madam. She has just flung away the plate of food offered her for dinner." Tola reported.

The Chairman was furious: "What arrant nonsense! Call her for me."

A short while later, there was a knock on the door, and a beautiful, slim-built lady entered, looking rather upset.

"Helen, why would you throw away and waste my food like that? Are you crazy?"

"Ma, they know very well that …"

"Shut your trap!" the Chairman cut in, "There can be no excuse for what you've done. You're just a senseless girl who lacks proper home training, and … come back here. Where do you think you're going?"

I looked up just in time to see that Helen had turned her back on the Madam and was headed for the door.

Madam Chairman jumped up from her seat, "I say come back here or I'll deal with you!"

Unmoved by the threat, Helen kept moving towards the door of the expansive office until she left, leaving the Chairman stunned.

Wow! What a bold lady, I thought. Most officers, even management staff, would pay obeisance to, even lick the boots of, someone in the Chairman's position. It was a special committee appointment, with a lot of resources, in which position, the Chairman held executive powers and was responsible only to the Honourable Minister, General Adisa. She had the rare privilege of being able to dispense opportunities and favours at will. She was the goddess of the committee. And here was a support staff in junior position who dared to stand up to this revered goddess! I came out of my wonderment to realise that my boss was still screaming blue murder.

"What insolence! I must make that stupid girl pay a heavy price for this rudeness and insubordination!" She was now addressing the Head of the Stores Unit, Atayero.

"Calm down, Madam. Let me handle it," said Atayero, in a bid to pacify the enraged Madam.

That was my first meeting with Helen Emevu. Several weeks later, I was surprised to find out that she was still on her beat at the Toll Gate Stores at Broad Street. I knew the Chairman was wrong in condemning her without even bothering to listen to her side of the story; after all, you don't pass judgement after hearing only one side. It's a fundamental principle of fair hearing. Though I admired Helen's boldness, I feared for her job. I thought the least she would get was being posted out of the Toll Gate Stores. You simply don't step on the toes of a powerful official who had the ears of the Honourable Minister, and hope to get out of it unhurt.

On my enquiry, Atayero's explanation for getting the Toll Gate Madam to calm down was instructive.

"We've settled that little misunderstanding. You know, it's not easy to get a replacement for an officer as efficient as Helen."

I was still lost in my reverie when I was jolted back into the present by Rose. "Why are you so deep in thought? Food is ready. Aren't you ready for lunch?" She asked curiously.

"Of course, I am. I was just recalling my first meeting with your neighbour-to-be."

"Hmm, really? Lunch is served. Would you mind telling me all you know about her over lunch?"

CHAPTER 12: A LIFE PARTNER COMES ALONG

"If you want a good marriage, marry your friend. It's not a lack of love, but a lack of friendship that makes unhappy marriages." ~ Friedrich Nietzsche

The Ministry's movement of its staff from Lagos to Abuja continued unabated throughout 1997. Before the end of that year, the population of the staff in Abuja crossed the 1,000 mark. That was nothing if you considered the fact the Ministry had a staff strength of over 20,000 nationwide. Majority of the Headquarters staff remained in Lagos, not due to their unwillingness to relocate to the new capital, but due to lack of official accommodation for them.

The situation in Abuja got pretty bad, so bad that many staff, especially the junior ones, started sleeping in their offices. The Ministry rented a mini-estate on Adetokunbo Ademola Crescent, Wuse 2, and used the otherwise residential blocks as its offices. The availability of bathrooms in those buildings enabled those who didn't have residential accommodation to sleep in their offices. It was not the best arrangement, of course, but they were hopeful that something better would come up, even if they had no idea exactly how.

"Lappee-Lappor"

The community of staff resident in Keffi became well-organised. My neighbour, the union activist, became the Chairman of the community, assisted by other officials. The community was well-received by Keffi residents, who organised a welcome party (during which I served as the MC) in our honour. The party was attended by a number of dignitaries, including the Emir of Keffi.

By mid-1997, the number of staff that had to commute daily from Keffi to Abuja had outstripped the capacity of the 30-seater Civilian bus provided. Four or five people could manage to stand, beyond which we couldn't help others. It was a 60-km trip from Keffi to the office – a journey which often took over an hour along the then single-carriage way. We all hoped that the situation would improve whenever additional buses promised by the management were made available. But until then, "continue to manage" served as the consolatory words from the management to us.

As we headed home sometime in July, our staff bus, having been filled up from Wuse 2, stopped to pick a few staff from Radio House. As they made their entry, I looked up from my seat and saw that slim beauty, Helen (yes, the same one with the boldness of a lion who stood up to the Toll Gate goddess), among the five new entrants, crammed uncomfortably at the bus entrance.

The inconvenience notwithstanding, I wanted to stand and give up my seat for her, but decided to play naughty first. Wasn't that what a gentle man would do? (No, I don't mean the naughty part).

"Hi Helen, welcome to Abuja. Remember me?"

"Yes, of course. Madam's P.A."

"Sorry, we don't have a seat for you, unless you don't mind sitting on my lap."

The offer to "lap" her was intended as a joke; but Helen, obviously exhausted from a hard day's work, took it with a flourish. Before you could say "Jack", she had made her way to my seat. With the kindest "please remain seated" that emanated from her lips, she gingerly settled herself on my laps!

"Thank you." She whispered, smiling in relief.

"You're welcome." I whispered with a smile in return.

Unbelief wrapped itself around everyone in the bus. Many broke out in giggles. Helen wasn't bothered in the least. Neither was I. Their unspoken thoughts soon clouded out the giggles. Silence descended on us – a silence I decided to puncture with a remark most unexpected.

"I don't understand why some of you acted like you had never seen a man 'lap' a woman before. That is what is called "Lappee and Lappor" because one who is lapped is a Lappee, and the one that offered to lap is the Lappor."

The entire bus burst into an uproarious laughter. One of them (most probably Sunday "Orinsunkun") shouted "Heeey, Lappee-Lappor!"

"Lappee-Lappor! Lappee-Lappor!" others chorused, sticking up their thumbs amidst continued laughter.

That was how "Lappee-Lappor" became the collective nickname given to Helen and me throughout our stay in Keffi and well beyond. We relished it. For us, it was the beginning of our friendship, a glorious friendship that would overcome all odds to last a lifetime, even though none of us realised it at the time.

In A Bind

I journeyed to Lagos for 1997 Christmas/ Grail Festival. It served as a time of reunion with my family, and a reunion with Ify, who seemed to have developed a renewed interest in our relationship. She brought up the suspended issue of the need for her to inform her parents that she was ready to settle down and request for a date when my parents could come to Udi to do the needful. She concluded with a surprising request.

"I need to come and see how the new Federal Capital looks like. Hope I can travel with you to Abuja this time around," she blurted out rather unexpectedly.

"No problem at all," I responded.

"When are you going back?"

"January 8."

"I'm on my annual leave till February. I'll go with you to Abuja."

"What about the visit to your parents?"

"I'll go from Abuja to Udi towards the end of January before returning to Lagos. Is that okay with you?"

"It's cool."

And that was how it played out. Ify's visit to Abuja was almost scandalous. Everyone around me had assumed that Helen and I were dating even when the relationship was purely platonic. We kept it that way for many months, though we were going out together occasionally. We just enjoyed each other's company and we shared lots of confidences, but how many people do you really owe explanations? Helen didn't seem to care what people thought or said. Why should I? When Ify arrived Abuja, Helen decided to give us some space – too much space. She literally stopped visiting me. And that was when my dilemma started.

Ify stayed with me for three weeks before leaving for Udi. We had numerous good outings and she enjoyed her stay. I couldn't say the same thing for myself. I was on leave too, so I had an awful lot of time to be with her, but I had a problem. I had become distracted. The thoughts of Helen invaded and colonised my mind. For three weeks, I hardly saw her and I felt tormented.

My thoughts were in a tumult. It was as if two versions of me were arguing in my head: What's Helen doing now? Could she be alone? What if another guy develops interest in her? So what? She has a right to have her own guy! Well, maybe she does; but be honest with yourself, Tunde: you'll become very unhappy, won't you? Yes, I guess I would! Really? Have you fallen in love with Helen? Why should I? I have Ify and she's here with me. You don't miss Ify when she's not with you, do you? If only you're courageous, you would break up with her now. The person you really want is Helen, and you know it. No! That's not possible! Why not? That's where your true happiness lies. Think about it!

At some point, Ify noticed my lack of concentration but couldn't figure out what was going on in my mind. Outwardly, I did whatever she wanted, including taking her on fun dates, parties and visits to friends; but inwardly, I

just wasn't with her. It seemed the long separation had caused some untold damage to the feelings I had for her. We now seemed to be irreconcilably drifting apart. I watched the drift helplessly, without a struggle. What could be happening? What had Helen done to me? I was in a bind.

Finally, the day came when Ify had to go to meet her parents at Udi. I took her to the Enugu Park in Abuja. I heard the other voice deep within: Why not stop her now? I opened my mouth a couple of times but no words came out. As I bade her goodbye, I heard the voice again: What if she returned with a date for you to bring your parents to Udi? I shrugged. I would cross that bridge on getting there. She had once expressed fears that, being the *Ada* (first daughter) of the family, her parents might be opposed to her marrying outside their tribe. I now wished that such opposition would come. Really? You coward!

From the Enugu Park, I returned to Keffi and went straight to Helen's place. The house was eerily quiet and I thought no one was in. A couple of knocks. No answer. I knew it: one fast guy who knew the value of diamond had taken her out! What a loss! As I turned to retrace my forlorn path to my residence in Angwan Kaje, I heard the door open.

"Sorry, I was sleeping. Please come in." Helen's voice seemed to float across to me, a sweet, sonorous voice I hadn't heard in a long while.

"I thought no one was in." I said, moving in with relief.

"I'm home alone. My neighbour has gone away for the weekend."

"Aren't you bored staying home alone?" I probed with concern.

"Not me. I enjoy my own company."

"You're not the only one who enjoys your company. I do too." It was time for true confession.

"Stop lying." She frowned, "What are you doing here when your fiancée is around?"

"She's gone. And I've missed you very badly. I think I'm in trouble."

"I guess I'm in trouble too," She returned with a smile.

"That makes two of us. Come over here."

Did I say I was in a bind? That must be the understatement of the year.

An Opportunity Almost Missed

By March, 1998, I was in a dilemma. No, not over my relationships. It was the dilemma of what I was to do with the offer to purchase a house, which I got through my interaction with the Federal Government Staff Housing Loans Board. The Director of the Board had been a member of an Inter-Ministerial Committee on Implementation of National Housing Programme - a Committee I had served as Secretary while in Lagos. The construction and allocation of the houses in the Abuja Phase had commenced, and I was given an offer to buy a one-bedroom bungalow in Lugbe.

That was good news, right? Yes, but how was I supposed to raise the required initial deposit of ₦42,000, without which I'd have to forfeit the allocation? A mortgage loan could only be arranged after payment of that initial deposit. I had less than half of the required amount, and had only two weeks to raise the balance or forfeit the offer. I was in a bind of a different kind.

A week later, I got a break. I went to my bank to make a withdrawal for groceries; after all, one must live before thinking of a house. I decided to check my balance: ₦48,000! What? Had there been a bank error in my favour? I found that there had been a cash deposit of ₦30,000 made into my account from Lagos. It was a loan from Leke. But how? I never told him anything. I must talk to him. How did he know I needed money? How did he know how much I needed? But talking to Leke proved to be easier said than done. There was no mobile telephone in those days, and only few people had access to fixed lines. What a miraculous intervention!

I couldn't wait to share the good news with Helen. Both of us had grown so close we had become mutual confidants. She had shown quite some concern when I told her about the opportunity of the house offer – an opportunity that I seemed destined to miss. I concluded by asking her the one question that had befuddled my mind.

"How did Leke know I needed money to pay that deposit?"

"I told him." Helen admitted almost apologetically.

I was stunned. "But I didn't ask you to tell him? How could you do that without letting me know?" I queried.

I remembered I had once given Leke's office phone number to Helen to help pass a message across to my brother. She had access to a phone in her office. So, rather than watch me lose my house allocation, Helen, on her own initiative, had taken the bull by the horn by alerting the one person who could have bailed me out with a loan. I had been too stupidly arrogant to seek assistance from anyone, and would have let the opportunity of buying a house on mortgage in Abuja pass me by. Helen's voice punctured the silence.

"I'm sorry I took that liberty without your permission. But knowing you, I was afraid that you might rather choose to miss that opportunity. But when I remembered that you had a brother, a banker, in Lagos, I thought it wise to let him know. Forgive me, if I did wrong."

"You've done well. Now, I can pay the required deposit tomorrow. Thank you," I muttered, almost in tears.

The Break at Easter Break

As I headed to Lagos for the Easter break that year, the words of my neighbour, the Chairman, and his wife rang in my mind: "If you're confused about trying to choose whom to marry between Ify and Helen, go with Helen. We have interacted with both of them, and we're convinced beyond all doubts that Helen is a better match for you."

It was as if my neighbours had observed that I was in a confused state of mind and wanted to give me their own piece of advice, which resonated with the conclusion I had already arrived at. I had thanked them for their concern and moved on. Now, the time of decision had come. There was no point in carrying on any more pretences. I contemplated how best to break the sad news to Ify. It would certainly break her heart. I had to be gentle about it. If I had known what was awaiting me in Lagos, I wouldn't have bothered myself so hard. The breaking of heart I had feared never happened.

It turned out that Ify's parents had vehemently opposed her plans of being married to someone not of Igbo extraction. They had insisted on upholding the long-held tradition that the *Ada* of the family must marry within. Ify wasn't the type that could stand up to her parents. It probably even came to her as a relief from the shadows that my Grail Movement membership had cast over our relationship. So, we ended up parting without the much-feared enmity.

"So, what happens to our planned outing?" Ify suddenly asked.

"Is it the one to Unilag for a live drama?"

"Yes. Or do you have any other plans?"

"If you don't mind, we can have the outing. The Anyas are looking forward to going with us. Let's not disappoint them."

"Ok. Good. I'll make preparations towards that."

We had a good outing. We kept the fact that we had agreed to a break-up to ourselves. The live drama at Unilag was great. The dinner afterwards was nice. It was as we headed back home that things took a rather

bizarre turn. We were still in the taxi that was to take Ify to her house at Orile before continuing to drop me at Festac. As we approached Orile, I noticed that Ify had started sobbing.

"What's the problem?" I enquired with concern.

"I don't want the break again. I want you." Ify protested in tears.

"But your parents are strongly opposed to it. Don't make this too hard for any of us. Let's just stick with our agreement."

"No. We can't allow them dictate to us. I want you…" She continued sobbing.

Despite her protestations, I insisted on proceeding with our previous agreement. And that was how it went. It was a nice Easter break. I wasn't surprised that what I felt was relief.

Farewell To Keffi

For the first time in my life, I had the feeling that I was ready for marriage. Things started happening pretty fast; and on 28 July 1998 (Helen's birthday), she and I became engaged. She said "Yes" and that meant a lot to me. I didn't know how I could have carried on with my life without her beside me. I had had to wait with bated breath for her return from a visit to Lagos for a family function. As we now had a future to look up to and plan together, our relationship took on a new meaning.

"I would love a quiet wedding. What do you think?" I ventured to ask Helen.

"You must be a mind reader. That makes two of us."

"Great! Tomorrow, I'll go to the Keffi Marriage Registry to enquire about what it takes to have a court wedding. Would you come with me?"

"Let me see you stop me," Helen returned, looking excited.

On the office front, things were happening too. Construction and furnishing works at the Ministry's new Headquarters Complex at Mabushi were now completed. All the offices had to move to the new complex. Management had decided that the vacated offices at Wuse 2 would be turned to residential accommodation for some of our staff. The question then remained: who would be the lucky ones to get the Wuse 2 accommodation?

It was decided that each department/unit should keep their respective blocks or flats for their staff. The official list was soon released, and I was one of the Budget Officers approved to move to Wuse 2. That was a piece of great news. After living in Keffi for 18 months, I was moving to Abuja City at last! There

would be no more travelling back to Keffi in the night after having worked late hours, especially during budget preparation or review periods. My immediate boss, Mrs Browne, released her official car to facilitate my movement. Life was getting better.

Saturday, 15 August 1998 was the day we finally left Keffi. Helen had been on hand to help me pack my stuff. There was no doubt that we were going to miss the camaraderie that had developed among Works & Housing staff in Keffi. My colleagues and friends were joyous, and they promised to organise a send-off party for us. Even I knew it was going to take a while for us to get Keffi out of us. There were too many memories to cherish, things to miss: bush meat and palm wine from "Zimbabwe", movies nights, cow tail pepper-soup nights, Tombola nights, name them. All that would soon become part of our past.

"Okay, dearest, drive safely. I'll see you on Monday and..." Helen was saying.

"Which Monday? You think I'm leaving you behind? You must be kidding. Get in the car," I interrupted her, frowning and sounding like a soldier.

"Who is kidding? You want me to come with you with just the clothes on my body?"

"Not to worry, baby. We'll come back tomorrow for your things. It's getting late, and you know I don't like driving at night. P-l-e-a-s-e!"

"Ok. You have a point. No problem then." Her acceptance was music to my ears.

The Chairman and his family waved us goodbye. We left the house with a promise to return the following day to pack more of my stuff. As we stepped into the car, I decided to tease Helen a little.

"So, you want to risk allowing those fine Abuja City babes snatch me from you?"

"They would not dare, unless they want their heads broken," she retorted amidst laughter.

Tying the Nuptial Knot

We settled in pretty well at Wuse 2. After completing moving all my stuff out of Keffi, I gave up my room, but we decided to keep Helen's room until after our marriage. The thoughts of marriage kept giving me goose bumps for quite a while. At some point during my bachelorhood, I had almost dismissed the idea of marriage, as I was scared by the sheer thought of making a lifetime commitment with anyone. In my view, the thought of taking a "till death do

us part" vow was scary. What if the marriage failed? After giving it some consideration, I decided that I would go ahead with marriage plans, and that I would give my best shot to making my marriage work; but should it become unworkable, divorce was an option I would not shy away from. I felt that, while anyone could make a mistake, no one was obliged to die in that mistake. I shared my thoughts with Helen.

"I agree with you absolutely on that," she responded. "There's no reason why anyone should die in a marriage. If, in spite of our best efforts, it doesn't work - we pray not - divorce is always an option."

"I promise that I'll give it my all," I assured her.

"So will I."

The need to meet each other's parents and siblings became our next target. Helen's mum and siblings were based in Lagos, but she had lost her father before coming to Abuja. All my own people were in Lagos too. We resolved to travel together to Lagos by late October for a formal declaration of our intention. And that was how it went.

My parents welcomed Helen warmly. Surprisingly, the information that Helen was an Isoko from Delta State did not elicit any negative comment or response from Dad. My meeting with her mum went smoothly. If she had any misgivings about allowing her daughter marry a Yoruba man, she didn't show it. Helen's siblings, especially her sister, Pat, welcomed me with open hands. She had just returned to Lagos after the completion of her National Youth Service in Kwara State. I was lavishly entertained in their house. We also went to see one of Helen's close relatives, Uncle Jonathan, in Festac.

Before departing Lagos, it was tentatively agreed that February 1999 would be a good period to have our traditional marriage. What Helen and I didn't tell anyone else was that we would have had our court marriage in Abuja by November or December 1998 before returning to Lagos for the traditional rites in February the following year. We wanted the court one to be as quiet as possible, and had no intention of making anyone travel to join us. The traditional marriage would, of course, be a big family affair for both families.

On our return to Abuja, we realised that we could no longer have a November date for our court wedding. We headed to the Keffi Marriage Registry and found out that it was a statutory requirement to place a 21-day notice on the Registry's notice board. That requirement could be waived under certain conditions, buy hey, why the hurry? We would give the 21-day notice. So, wedding date? Saturday, 12 December 1998.

The D-Day soon arrived. Present at our wedding were: Helen and I; the Chairman and his wife (who signed as witness for my wife); my brother, Kemi

(who was my witness); my colleague and housemate in Keffi, Mugu. Six persons in all. The driver that took us to the Registry, Elegushi, was the seventh.

At the climax of the Registry event, the Registrar asked the inevitable question.

"Are you a Christian, Muslim or a Pagan?"

Smiling, I responded, "None of the above."

"So, how would you take your Marriage Oath?"

"Affirmation, please."

"Well then, raise up your right hand and say after me…"

That was it: Oath taken, Marriage Register and Certificate signed. It was all over in about 20 minutes. How I loved that ceremony! Helen and I had just become the latest couple in town. Thereafter, the G7 moved on from the Registry to the New Keffi Hotel for a quiet reception. Nothing beats such simplicity!

Coincidentally, the Send-off Party - being organised by the Works & Housing Keffi Community for those of us who had been relocated from Keffi to Abuja City – had been fixed for the same day as our wedding. It turned out to be a pleasant surprise when I told Julius, the MC of the occasion, to include Helen on the official list of those being sent off. He sought to know why.

"She's my wife now," I told him.

"Wife? You mean fiancée?"

"No. Wife. We got married earlier today," I announced with pride, flashing my glittering gold wedding ring. "We've made it official at a private ceremony just this morning."

"That's great news, bro!" He screamed and gave me a massive hug. "I'm happy for the both of you. Congratulations!" He then continued in a whisper, "I know some ladies who aren't gonna like this, bro."

"That's their problem, not mine," I returned, chuckling, as Julius made for the stage to make the announcement to the rest of the surprised community at the party.

"I have the honour, ladies and gentlemen, to present to you the latest and most amiable couple in Abuja, Mr and Mrs Tunde Aina!"

CHAPTER 13: BEHOLD! TWO ANGELS!

"Children are the world's most valuable resource and its best hope for the future." ~ John F. Kennedy

Saturday, February 20 1999, two days after my 33rd birthday, was another momentous day for both Helen and me: it was the day of our traditional wedding. I had no idea how my wife managed to convince her people to allow us have the ceremony in Lagos, rather than having to go to her home-place for it. All I knew was that, against all expectations, she managed to achieve just that feat.

My people were ready early that morning to go over to Helen's parents' Lagos residence at Makoko, but we had to wait. The National Assembly elections to usher in the 4th Republic had been slated for that same day. This came after our wedding date had been fixed and it was decided to go ahead with our plans once the restriction on movement was lifted. The Budget Division (where I worked) had put its new bus on the road to Lagos for my colleagues to join the celebration. They had arrived a day to the wedding. So, starting from about 2.30 pm on 20 February, all roads led to Makoko, for the ceremony billed to commence at 4.

It started right on time. I was blown away but delighted by the simplicity of it all. The actual rites - involving acceptance of the gifts and bridal price and handing over of the bride to the groom's family – took place in their parlour, and only five members from my family were admitted. All other friends and family members remained seated outside, unaware that the real ceremony was already on inside. In about 30 minutes, we were done. Thereafter, the inside party joined the rest of the family outside for the reception.

"Won ti ya fun wa ni iyawo wa niyen?" ("They've released our bride to us already?"), asked one of my astounded aunts.

"Beeni o, Faaji l'oku bayi" ("Yes, it's now time for partying"), I responded.

The reception, which was chaired by Pastor Titiloye, was beautifully-organised and modest. Rains of "Congratulations" poured down on us during and after the ceremony. I was too excited to eat. When it was dance time, Helen almost threw all caution to the wind: she danced like "ikoto". I had to caution her to take things easy with her dances, as we both knew that her first pregnancy was already about five weeks gone. We also knew that an even bigger party awaited us on returning to my parents' place at Oshodi.

The party at Oshodi was grand. With a live band on stage, it lasted until the early hours of the following morning. Even my aunts, who had almost

crucified me for insisting that we would not take any "aso ebi" for the ceremony, had to concede that it all turned out beautifully well, after all. Before the party was over, I took my bride on a "thank you" round across every table, to all the guests that came to honour us with their presence. We also later went visiting some of them in their respective homes. Thank you for making our day! It was indeed a grand celebration.

A few days later. Helen's sickness started. It was as if the "good sickness", not uncommon among pregnant women, was waiting for us to complete the ceremony before bringing my bride down. With my mum and a number of my aunts still very much around her, Helen had nothing to worry about. As our return to Abuja loomed closer, Mum called me.

"I think you should leave Helen with us in Lagos while you return to your work in Abuja. She'll be in good hands here," she declared.

I looked at Mum, whose life had been an embodiment of sacrifice for her parents, her siblings, her husband and her children. Touched by her motherly love, warmth and support, I admired her greatly. Before responding, I contemplated how I could turn down her offer without sounding offensive.

"Thank you, Mum, for all your care and support. While I know that Helen will be in good hands in Lagos, I do not intend to leave her behind. I want to be part of this entire process, with whatever challenges it brings. We'll return to Abuja together."

"No problem then. We'll keep praying for you."

"Thank you very much indeed, Mum." I gave her a hug.

Keeping Our First Baby

We returned to Abuja about two weeks after the traditional event. We left with loads of bitter kola, having been informed that putting one in a pregnant woman's mouth could hold back vomiting for at least a few hours. It was in Abuja that the real battle began: the battle to keep our first pregnancy.

Helen could hardly keep down anything she swallowed: she threw up everything. The bitter kola wasn't working anymore. What to do? We went to hospital and a doctor placed her on avomine tablets, which worked as far as holding the vomit was concerned. The side effect was that my *iyawo* could sleep the whole day: convincing her to eat was a huge challenge in itself.

"Please, Darling, you really need to get up and eat. It's for your own good," I urged her.

"Leave me alone. Just let me sleep" was the inevitable response.

"Eat a little at least. It's for the good of the baby - our baby."

That got her attention. It was as if my wife couldn't be bothered about her own personal welfare, but she'd do anything once she realised or was told that "it's for the good of the baby."

"Okay. I'll try."

Two months into the pregnancy, there was a development that made my heart sink: Helen started spotting blood! What? We mustn't lose our baby. Off to the hospital we went only to receive a most shocking news. The doctor announced without empathy, "You've already lost the baby due to worm infestation." He proceeded to recommend that worm expeller be taken before trying again.

On getting home, we reviewed our situation. How could the doctor pronounce that my wife had lost her pregnancy without even calling for a pregnancy scan first? This doctor seemed to be a quack, despite working at a government medical facility. We agreed to get a second opinion – one that must be evidence-based. We resolved to see another doctor, who recommended a scan. Good. The scan result showed that the pregnancy was still intact, but we could lose it due to the "ante-verted position of the uterus". Not bad. Hope rising. Our baby must be saved. But how?

Salvation eventually came through an Ijaw woman who was able to, through professional massaging, set Helen's womb upright without jeopardising the life of the baby. And the blood spot stopped. Great! The rest of the pregnancy would now be smooth-sailing, or so we thought until the night my wife became so weak that she slumped! I rushed her to the hospital. She was admitted and placed on intravenous drips. Just one night and she came out strong again. It was like magic. If we had known what to do when she could hardly eat, we would have gone for hospital admission and drips much earlier.

A month later, Helen commenced her antenatal visits at Wuse General Hospital. A battery of tests was conducted. All went well except one item: her blood group was A- (a negative rhesus factor). Confirmatory tests showed exactly the same thing. I was invited for the same test: A+ (a positive rhesus factor).

"In today's world, this is nothing to worry about," the doctor assured, "Just ensure to get your anti-D injection ready before the date of delivery. It will help to protect your next baby."

And that was how it went. We could now commence our shopping in preparation for the arrival of our baby. Helen became stronger with each

passing month. She was even able to resume her duties at work until the time arrived for her to proceed on maternity leave.

Boundless Joy!

"I think the baby is coming."

Helen's words were music to my ears. It was 4.30 am on 12 October. Yetunde had earlier arrived Abuja. She wanted to be part of the process leading to the arrival of her first niece. Off we went to the hospital. In a couple of hours, I was going to be a father. How very sweet!

Helen was admitted into the labour ward, and the long wait started. Minutes ran into hours. I saw some women who went into labour come out within two hours or thereabout. Worried, I contacted the midwife.

"I hope there's no problem?"

"No problem sir. Your wife is a first timer. They generally take much longer. Just relax."

The midwife's words put my mind at rest, but only for a while. Three hours later. No word. I enquired again.

"It's a case of poor dilation. It's not a problem. We'll just induce her until her dilation reaches the required 10 cm."

"Ok."

By evening, the dilation stubbornly remained at 7cm. 11.30 pm still 7cm. My anxiety was now becoming huge and strong enough to be a professional boxer! Eating was out of the question.

"Will someone tell me what is happening?" I yelled.

"We've sent for the obstetric gynaecologist on call. He will soon be here."

"Is there a problem?"

"The doctor will explain to you."

"Can I see my wife?"

"No, please. Men are not allowed into our labour room. Other women are in there."

I felt I could strangulate someone.

The doctor soon arrived. He disappeared into the labour room for the next 30 minutes. He came out to meet quite a number of anxious faces.

"Who is Tunde Aina?" asked the doctor.

I rose: "I am."

"Come with me."

He led me away from the labour room. My heart sank. My goodness, no bad news, please! The doctor then explained the situation to me: due to inadequate dilation, continuing with labour could put the baby's life at risk. For a safe delivery, he recommended an emergency Caesarean Section (CS) for which my consent was required. I felt relieved.

"Of course, Doctor. You have my consent. Please go ahead."

The doctor brightened up. It was as if he expected me to be difficult or refuse consent. "Ok then. We'll prepare the necessary papers for your signature."

Wednesday, 13 October 1999. Helen was wheeled into the operating theatre at 2.45 am and I heard the first cry of our first angel at exactly 3.10 am. Anxiety gave birth to relief!

"Congratulations! You have a baby girl," the midwife announced.

"Great! How's my wife?"

"She's doing well. She's still under sedation. We'll bring her out shortly."

Ayomitide (Tide) had arrived. Yetunde and I hugged each other. Our joy exploded into tears! That was when I truly came to understand the meaning of the expression, "boundless joy".

The next day, Mum landed in Abuja, having been told to prepare ahead for coming to do "*omugho*". With tears of joy in her eyes, she held the new baby and poured showers of blessings on her. Mum's coming made things a lot easier for everyone around, and I was able to go back to work, as it was the peak of the Budget preparation season. She so pampered Helen and the baby with love and care that I was afraid we might be unable to cope once she returned to Lagos. And she did return, sooner than we had planned. She couldn't stay as long as she would have loved to because Leke's wife, Ama, had delivered their first child, Folarin, on 9 November. So, Mum's attention was required in Lagos before the end of that month.

Joy Interrupted?

Sometime in April, 2000, I woke up in the night with an agonising pain all over my chest. Getting up from the bed proved to be more than I could manage. Each time I tried, the searing pain made my effort useless. I couldn't even turn my head to look at my wife who was sleeping peacefully beside

me. What was going on? I had no explanation. How could such an agonising, paralysing pain come upon me so suddenly, without any prior warning? We had only recently bought a car shortly after the arrival of our daughter. Shouldn't I have some time to enjoy my family life?

I contemplated my situation. What could be happening to me? I arrived at the conclusion that I was having a heart attack. I wondered if that was going to be my end on Earth. I didn't shudder at the thought. If that was going to be my end, so be it. My only regrets would be that Helen was going to become widowed so soon after our marriage and just a few months after the arrival of our beautiful angel. What would she do? Well, Mum would be happy to keep my baby, if it proved too much for Helen to cope alone, I concluded. Then, I came back to my senses: I needed to put up some fight.

"Helen" I called out gently. No response.

"Helen!" I called again, raising my voice. This time, my wife responded and got up.

"Please help me raise my head up," I pleaded.

"What's the problem? Why can't you raise yourself up? What's happening?"

"I don't know. I just have this indescribable pain all over my chest and shoulder region. I need you to help me up, please."

Helen got behind me on the bed and tried to pull my shoulders up. The pain I felt was deeply searing. I screamed in agony.

My wife gave up, scared, "Should I call our neighbours for help?"

"No, please. Not to worry." I was trying to quell her growing sense of alarm. "Just get me two tablets of paracetamol. I think the pain would subside with that." I managed to take the tablets with my head only slightly raised.

Fifteen minutes later, the pain had subsided somewhat and I was able to get out of bed. I still had no clue as to what was going on. I decided that I had to go to hospital for a thorough investigation. Early in the morning, my friend, Chima, a fellow Crossbearer resident in the same block, showed up to take me to the hospital. Helen must have summoned him. I thanked him for coming, but insisted I was already strong enough to drive myself to the hospital. I did just that.

A battery of tests was conducted. The elevation of my white blood cell count made the doctor conclude that my body was fighting an infection. He prescribed some antibiotics and strong pain-relief medication. After a physical examination, the doctor assured me that it was not a heart attack.

"If the symptom continues, see me in a week's time, and I'll refer you to a cardiologist," he told me.

I commenced my medication immediately. The pains were all gone in about three days, and I was as fit as a fiddle in five. I felt there was no need to see the doctor again; no need to see a cardio. Maybe I should have, but I didn't. Perhaps because I had imagined the worst-case scenario, my relief was overwhelming: Helen wasn't going to be widowed, neither would my new baby be fatherless, after all! Life moved on!

Maitama Becomes Home

By mid-2000, official information got to us that the Ministry had purchased the residential estate where we resided at Wuse 2, with the exception of Block B, which happened to be my block. Why would the Ministry leave out Block B? It was discovered that the owner of the estate had sold off Block B to another government agency before the Ministry expressed interest in the purchase. So, what would happen to residents of Block B? The answer soon came via the publication of names of those to move to the Ministry's newly acquired estate in Kubwa. Curiously enough, my name was missing on the list.

Movement of affected staff out of our Wuse 2 Estate commenced in July 2020, but my family and I had nowhere to move to. My protestation to the Director of Personnel Management of the Ministry, Mrs Titiloye, for having been left out of the Kubwa arrangement soon yielded positive result: an Assistant Director had been asked to vacate his room at the Ministry's estate in Maitama, having been provided with a full-flat accommodation in another part of the city. The Maitama room could be mine soon! That's much better than having to move to Kubwa. Talk about a disappointment turned blessing!

I finally got the key to the Maitama accommodation, and I completed movement on Sunday, 27 August 2000. My brother, Kemi, was on hand to help with the movement. Another interesting thing about that day was that it was the day our beautiful daughter walked for the first time. As soon as I dropped her in the living room of our new apartment, she just started walking instead of standing still or sitting down. She moved about eight steps forward before slumping on her bum. My wife squealed with delight. Welcome to our new world. It was the beginning of our sojourn in Maitama.

Our Second Angel Arrives

We had a house party to celebrate Tide's first birthday, which was well-attended by many children in the neighbourhood. Some of our old friends

from Wuse 2, who had relocated to Kubwa, were on hand. A birthday cake was cut, with Tide looking resplendent in a white and green birthday gown. Close friends like Mubo, Mercy and Charity also joined the celebration.

Some months later, it was time for another celebration – a private one: another baby was on the way for Helen and me. We had our confirmation and started making preparations. As soon as Helen's "good sickness" started, we sprang into action. We remembered how being admitted into a hospital for intravenous drips had been deeply helpful in stabilising our first pregnancy. This time, we were determined not to wait for any emergency to happen first. We proceeded to the hospital and got her on drips. It worked, not as magically as the first, but it worked all right.

By the fourth month, we decided to have a scan just to make sure that everything was proceeding fine with the baby. "Activity parameter: the baby is all over the place!" reported the doctor. She also informed us that we were going to have a baby girl. Great news!

"How do you feel about having another girl?" Helen asked me on our way back from the scan centre.

"I'm very good with it. I just want a healthy baby; the gender is inconsequential to me. And we're good to stop thereafter."

Helen eyed me, but kept quiet. I knew what was going on in her mind. We had agreed, even before marriage, that we would be good with two children; but I had reluctantly agreed to allow a caveat: should the first two turn out to be of the same gender, we could go for a third, which would be final, irrespective of the gender. Well, I made up my mind that I could concede to having a third child, only if my wife was really, really in earnest about the issue. But you never know with women. Why could they not just agree to stop at having two? Three was an odd number I didn't fancy. I shrugged: we would cross that bridge on reaching it.

My wife enrolled for her ante-natal at the same hospital where we had Tide: Wuse General Hospital. Everything was going on well until nurses and midwives declared a national industrial action just before our baby was due. What should we do? It would be irresponsible to wait until labour set in before taking action. It was time to register in a private hospital. We did. After making much-needed enquiry, we settled for City Hospital at Wuse Zone 5. We were reminded to buy and keep our anti-D injection ahead of time. No problem.

In the early hours of Sunday, 3 February 2002, Helen went into labour. We managed the early pains during the rest of the night, and headed to Wuse General as soon as the day broke. But nurses and midwives were still on strike. Doctors were on duty, but there was nothing they could do in the absence of nurses/midwives. We headed to City Hospital, where my wife was immediately

admitted into the labour room. I had given the doctor the history regarding the delivery of our first baby, and asked him to let us have a CS. He urged us to give labour a chance first, and I reluctantly agreed.

Minutes ticked into hours. The morning gave birth to afternoon and was threatening to deliver the evening. The issue was the same as the first: inadequate dilation. So, why continue to allow my wife suffer in the labour room? I couldn't understand the doctor's reluctance, after all, he was a consultant Obstetrics Gynaecologist. I called the doctor and threatened to take my wife elsewhere, rather than continue with labour that wasn't yielding the expected result. He obliged my request, and gave directives to get the operating theatre prepared.

The entire operation took about 30 minutes, and at 7.05 pm that Sunday, we welcomed our second angel into the world! Again, Mum hit Abuja the next day; and four days later, Helen and the baby were discharged from hospital. Tide was full of smiles, as she now had a playmate. My wife and I had become proud parents of two angelic beings. Moteniola (Teni) had just joined our fold. It was a sight to cherish - a period of undiluted ecstasy!

The following Sunday, a pastor from Living Faith, my wife's church, turned up after church service, ostensibly to name our baby.

"You're welcome, Pastor. I've already done the naming, as early as 6am. Her name is: Moteniola Erezi Aina. You may call her Teni, for short. Just sit down and join the celebration," I proudly announced to the astonishment of Pastor Babs.

"You this man. Na wah for you o!"

I really don't know why pastors imagine they're the ones that have the right to conduct the naming of new born babies. I was glad my wife agreed with me that it was the responsibility of the parents to name their child; and that any pastor attending the event would just be like any other invitee. That was what we did for Tide. That was what had now been repeated. The important thing was that my two girls were adorable angels to behold!

CHAPTER 14: OF VICISSITUDES AND BLESSINGS

"Death leaves a heartache no one can heal; love leaves a memory no one can steal." ~ A headstone in Ireland.

Tide was a little over a year when we had to enrol her at a day-care centre. We made some enquiries before settling for Anglican Church Day-care Centre at Wuse Zone 5. Her experiences there prepared her well ahead of going to school. Sometime in November 2001, I went to pick her up from the centre, and found her sleeping. I carried my baby. She stirred and winced. Only then did I notice a bulge on her forehead. I was mad with fury.

"What happened to my baby?" I exploded.

The attendant tried to offer an explanation: "I'm sorry sir. She fell from the top of the centre table. We have already given her some paracetamol syrup from the Health Bay."

"Are you not supposed to look after these children? Where were you?" I complained bitterly, hardly pacified by her explanation.

"Tide loves climbing. She climbed unto the table while I was busy with another child. We're deeply sorry, please."

I took my baby home. What else could I do? The attendant had said that "Tide loves climbing." That must be the understatement of the year. Even at home, Tide would climb just about anything in sight – chairs, tables, drawers, even window panes. A neighbour of ours was so surprised watching Tide try to climb his door that he once asked Helen jokingly, "Did you conceive this your baby on a tree top or something?" Her fall from the table at the day-care centre that day was a constant and present danger associated with her love for climbing.

Back home, as Tide slept peacefully later that day after having her forehead carefully, though painfully, massaged with ice cubes by her mum. As I watched her sleep, I contemplated: How was it that evolutionary Biology could contrive with nature to give us such beautiful things like children? You behold the face of your innocent child and you realise that you have something to live for, a part of you to love, to nurture, to protect, or even die for.

Die? Yes, death is the inevitable end to life; it is as constant as life itself. You soon realise that, just as nature gives us in abundance, it also occasionally takes from us, as part of the complex tapestry of life. We came to that point when it dawned on us that those who served as vehicles to deliver us here had played their part under the sun; and, sadly, it was soon time for their departure.

Helen Loses Mum

Few months later, that inevitable anticlimax approached us. Helen was summoned to Lagos that her mum was seriously ill: she had suffered a stroke. This happened in 2001, before Teni's arrival. Helen had to travel with Tide. I dropped them at Chisco Park in Abuja.

"Don't worry," I tried to reassure my wife, "Mama would soon bounce back in good health."

"Okay, take care of yourself. I'll keep you posted," she responded.

Our ardent hopes for my mum-in-law's recovery were dashed. Mama left this world, leaving a painful void and memories of her being. The deepest kind of pain in this life is the pain of losing someone you love, but the consolation one gets is the joy of having loved them. I told my wife to take consolation in having done her best for her parents while they lived. Now, we were left with only their memories to cherish.

I took my full leave from office, so I could re-join my wife in Lagos and be part of Mama's funeral arrangements. My friends, like Mubo and Chima, even my office colleagues, requested that I keep them posted once burial dates were fixed, as I shouldn't be left to attend my mother-in-law's burial alone. Deep within me, I had my doubts. Would I take my friends all the way from Abuja first to Lagos and later to Ikpide in Delta State? And then, take them all through the trouble and anxiety of having to cross the great river by boat or ferry from Asaba-Ise to Ikpide? Besides, there were no guest houses or hotels in Ikpide. I knew I didn't want anyone to go through such immense troubles on my account, but I kept my plans to myself.

In Lagos, it was a different ball game. My mum, as well as some of my siblings and aunts insisted they must be part of the team to Ikpide. Even my brother's wife, Ama, and my friend, Niyi, just didn't want to hear any excuses. Wherever the funeral was taking place, no matter how remote the village, they just had to come along. Niyi even insisted on taking his car. I planned to take my own car too. We would drive as far as vehicles could go before disembarking to complete the journey by ferry. I made the final effort to dissuade Niyi.

"Ikpide is a small village in the heart of the River Niger. They have no hotels for lodging. Where are you going to sleep for a minimum of two nights?"

"Is it not you? You would sleep somewhere, wouldn't you? Wherever you sleep is good enough for me, even if we have to sleep on chairs, so be it."

I gave up.

Despite all my fears, the funeral rites went smoother than I had anticipated. Some of my in-laws who had houses in the village volunteered and released their houses for our use. Everyone, including those who travelled with us in hired buses, crossed the river in the same double-decker ferry. On arrival, we were all able to squeeze in somewhere. Both the wake-keep on the day of arrival and all the burial rites of the following day, including the partying, all went smoothly as planned. My wife and Theo, her brother, were splendid to behold: they were both up and doing, making sure that all arrangements went according to plan.

We returned to Lagos the third day. During the return journey, Niyi, Tosin and I decided that the ferry that would take about an hour was too slow, and we opted to cross the river in flying boat! We then treated ourselves to some palm wine while awaiting the rest of the team joining us by ferry. The drive from Asaba-Ise to Lagos took over six hours. It was, indeed, quite some experience!

Mum Departs

It was a rude shock when, in 2006, I received a call from Yetunde. She informed me that a tiny sore had broken out at the site where Mum's mastectomy was earlier done! Mum had had one of her breasts surgically removed due to the detection of a malignant lump. She had undergone the required chemotherapy treatment, and we were told – or perhaps we assumed – that the worst-case scenario was over, making Mum a breast cancer survivor. It was not to be. Even her referral to a Consultant Oncologist at the National Hospital in Abuja for further treatment did not offer much hope. My dear mum finally passed away on 11 April 2007.

Two weeks later, Mum's remains were committed to mother earth inside the family's Arowojobe premises, after having obtained all necessary approvals from the Oshodi-Isolo Local Government. On Dad's suggestion, it was decided that a double grave vault be prepared, so that the upper chamber could be used later for the interment of Dad's remains whenever the time came.

Prior to the day of Mum's burial, a contingent had arrived from Ikenne to facilitate a date for the "*iwolefu*" – an age-long tradition for raising funds for burial, through the imposition of funeral levy on extended family members. This was a tradition that had never sat well with me, and I had told Mum several times in the past that her generation would, in all probability, be the last to observe the "*iwolefu*" tradition. I had always felt that people should be allowed to bury their dead with whatever resources they had, and that family support in that regard ought to be completely voluntary, rather than being imposed. I was, indeed, very happy when my siblings supported my views on

this. And so it was that we did Mum's funeral rites and burial without allowing the imposition of levies on anyone.

The Christ Apostolic Church played their part for the Christian Wake-keep and the burial. The interment was followed by a reception on the grounds of Ikeja Grammar School, Bolade-Oshodi (my alma mater). At a point during the reception, the musician on stage called my name several times, in the expectation that I would grace the dance floor. I remained unmoved.

"Won't you go and dance?" One of Mum's sisters urged me.

"Not me. I'm certainly not in the mood to dance."

"You're going to lose a lot of money, because it's the dance that would provide an opportunity for your guests to *spray* you with money," she persisted.

"I don't like the arrogant display of spraying money. I find it ridiculous. I believe people who want to give anyone money, for whatever reason, should do so in a dignifying manner, not by placing money on people's foreheads. It's extremely nauseating to me. Besides, Mum's death is a sad event, at least for me, and I fail to appreciate why I should be dancing."

"Okay o. Your own thing is always different."

That was the end of that conversation.

It was curious to note that most of my siblings also didn't even agree to grace the dance floor during the party, despite being urged to do so. Other family members and invitees who felt like dancing did so cheerfully, and everything went well, as planned. Condolence messages continued to pour in for days after the ceremony. We returned to base in Abuja ten days later.

An Encounter with Clinton Omezi

Midway into my appointment as a Chief Admin Officer (Budget) in the Office of the Head of the Civil Service of the Federation (OHSF), I got a pleasant surprise. The Permanent Secretary, Dr (Mrs) Abebe, who was relatively new in the office, sent for me. I went to her office without having any idea what was coming.

My Perm Sec, with smiles on her face, announced, "I'm nominating you for a Master's scholarship programme being sponsored by the Australian Government. Each Permanent Secretary has been asked to nominate three prospective candidates who must have had a minimum of second class upper in their first degree. I hope you made a 2:1 in your first degree?"

"Yes ma. I made a very good 2:1," I responded with delight.

"That's great." She paused before continuing, "This nomination is just the beginning of the process. You're going to face a qualifying examination and a selection interview. I've not forgotten your brilliant briefing and guidance when I first came to this office without any knowledge of budgeting. I'm quite confident you won't disappoint me."

"I'll give it my all to ensure I don't fall short of your expectation."

"Ok. Collect the application form from my P.A."

"Thank you, ma."

I returned to my office, deep in thoughts. An Australia Government scholarship! How awesome! So, this woman truly had me in mind, as she had promised. Memories of our first meeting flew through my mind: the new Perm Sec had summoned a meeting of the Funds Allocation Committee, with Budget Division providing the secretariat. Being a medical doctor who had no experience of budgeting, she had asked the Head of Budget Division for detailed briefing on the budgeting process and the breakdown of funds allocation intended for discussion at the meeting.

Despite being relatively new in the office, the Deputy Director of Budget, the US-trained Clinton Omezi, would have had little or no problem doing the briefing required, if he had allowed me brief him, or taken the pain to read through the briefing notes I left with him four days earlier. But no. His extreme arrogance would not allow him. Hear him:

"You think there's anything you know that I don't? I was a member of the Presidential Budget Think Tank for two years in the United States. Your Budget knowledge is nothing compared to the experience I've had."

"Yes sir." I dropped my briefing notes and withdrew from his office.

My DD had a problem. His mind had been poisoned against me. He had been misinformed about how the former DD, Mrs Browne, and I had controlled everything in the Division. He was determined to break what he perceived as my stronghold regarding budget preparation and breakdown. But, was it my fault that I was the only officer in the entire Division who had a good grasp of Ms-Excel spreadsheet application used in budget preparation? Could anyone blame me for sending myself, years earlier, on a Diploma course in Data Processing during which I acquired useful digital skills? Why should I be blamed for the lack of enthusiasm or interest displayed by some of my colleagues even when I tried to teach them what I knew?

His nemesis came on being asked for a briefing during the next Funds Allocation Committee meeting. Clinton Omezi started rambling, so much so that no one at the meeting understood what he was saying. Prompted by the Director of Finance & Accounts (my Head of Department), I went to offer

some assistance but met with a rebuff from Clinton. On being told what was going on, the Perm Sec asked me to present the required briefing if I could. So, I rose and not only gave the briefing without having to look into my notes, but answered every question that came up without mincing words. The breakdown under consideration was the work of my hand, after all.

Everyone was impressed with my presentation - everyone, except Clinton Omezi, who felt so bad about that development that he walked out of the meeting. The Perm Sec was so impressed that she asked that I should be seated next to her for the rest of the meeting, to make consultation with me a lot easier. I felt somewhat uncomfortable but had to comply. After the meeting, the Perm Sec thanked me profusely and asked to know more about me.

"What's your name?"

"Babatunde Aina, Chief Budget Officer."

"Thank you very much, Mr Aina. I won't forget. Should I need any further explanation, I'll send for you."

Obviously, she had truly not forgotten. She had now nominated me for consideration for the Australian Development Scholarship Award. She had warned me that the selection process was going to be quite competitive. No problem with that. I had never been afraid of competition. I must get that award. I must justify my Perm Sec's confidence in me. But between Clinton Omezi and me, the battleline had just been drawn!

Over the next two months, my DD tried to sideline me in the Division. When the next budget allocation came, he tried to get the breakdown done and analysed without my input. It was botched. The Director eventually summoned me to repair the damage done to the funds allocation breakdown. She then played a mediatory role between my boss and me. But Clinton would not budge. His ego had become so bruised that he hated the sight of me. He accused me of humiliating him before the Perm Sec at a meeting. I guessed there was something utterly wrong with his thinking process. How could he turn around to blame me after shunning my offer of assistance? Indeed, some mothers do have them!

Subsequently, the workflow of the Division was negatively impacted until the Director briefed the Perm Sec about the unwholesome development. Clinton was, thereafter, posted out to another Ministry. It was only then that peace returned to Budget Division.

A Visit to Jos and the Yankari Games Reserve

It was the Easter of 2008. My brother, Kunle, who had started working in Jos after the completion of his youth service there, had invited us to have a vacation in Jos. My wife had thought it was a nice idea, as it would give her the opportunity of visiting the city of her birth. Besides, we could even go from there on a visit to the popular Yankari Games Reserve and Resort. Tide and Teni would love the vacation. So, off we went on a family drive to Jos.

Kunle was on hand to receive us. He played the wonderful host and took us round a number of interesting places in the city of Jos, including the zoological garden. The holiday in Jos also afforded us the opportunity of seeing Sade, my cousin, who had relocated from Lagos to Jos shortly after getting married to a Jos-based man. On Good Friday, it was time to embark on the much-anticipated almost 200km journey to the Yankari in Bauchi State.

My first surprise was that, on getting to the Yankari junction along Bauchi-Gombe Highway, we realised that the Games Reserve/Resort was still far-flung, as we had another 70km trip to get to our destination. On arrival, however, the natural and serene ambience of the Reserve assured us that it was a worthwhile trip that promised some exhilaration and excitement. Finding good accommodation soon became a challenge, since it was festive period. Wondering if we had to spend the night in our car, we approached the hotel staff.

"We've come all the way from Abuja. Could you help us get accommodation, please?" I pleaded.

"It's tough. You should have done a prior booking."

"Now that we're here without a booking, any hope?"

"If you don't mind a private arrangement, we have some staff who give up their houses in the Reserve … for appropriate consideration, of course."

"Ok. Let's have a look."

It was fixed. Accommodation sorted. We could now relax and enjoy ourselves.

The next day, we partook in the Yankari Ride in the company of Games Rangers. This involved moving us around the reserve, on sight-seeing of the various animals, including elephants and lions, in their natural habitat, as well as explorative visits to the amazing caves and tunnels that had existed there for possibly thousands of years! If you had the nerve, you could drop from the vehicle and venture into those caves. Kunle, Helen and I did, but many of the other tourists in the group preferred the safety of the jeeps. It was both exciting and eerie. I was awash with goose-bumps!

An even more stupendous experience awaited us in the evening when we visited the Yankari Warm Spring, where we had the opportunity of swimming in natural spring water that was so clean that we could see the white sand at the bottom. And, amazingly, the water had a temperature of 31 degree Celsius all-year round. You could spend a whole night in that spring without feeling cold!

Baboons were everywhere in the reserve. If you left the doors of your room or car open, you could be sure that those baboons would jump in heartily and help themselves to any edible stuff in sight. We had a never-to-be-forgotten WOW experience at the Yankari. It was with great reluctance that we departed the Games Reserve on Sunday, after taking a few more dives in the warm spring.

"Darling and Sweetie, never mind. We'll return here sometime in future for another visit." That was Helen trying to pacify Tide and Teni. But that "sometime in future" is yet to materialise. No thanks to the insecurity that later became endemic in that region.

Dad Exits the Stage

The empty vault that was covered up after Mum's burial didn't stay empty for too long. Dad outlived Mum by just over two years. He had developed a malignant prostatitis that ultimately resulted in renal failure. Several sessions of dialysis didn't help much in prolonging his life, and Dad exited life's stage in June 2009.

This time, Leke, who had relocated with his family to the United Kingdom, could not manage to come down for the funeral. He had just got a new job, following the uprising occasioned by the global financial crisis of 2008. We had a conversation and agreed that it might be unadvisable requesting for leave to enable him attend a funeral so soon after his assumption of duty on the new appointment.

"Not to worry. We'll take care of the funeral," I assured him. "Just send your own contribution."

"I'll certainly do that. I know I can always rely on you guys to do the needful."

Initially, Dad's brother tried to prove difficult on hearing that Leke wasn't coming for Dad's burial ceremony.

"We have to postpone the funeral arrangements. We cannot bury my late brother in the absence of his first son. He must be the first to pour sand on his father's coffin," he declared.

His declaration notwithstanding, we went ahead with the funeral rights. After all, we (my siblings and I) had met and agreed on that. We would not allow one overbearing uncle derail our plans. And so it was.

The Church, as usual, played its role, even contributed financially to Dad's burial arrangements. It was during the funeral service that the officiating Minister, Pastor Olagbenjo, thought he had seen an opportunity to cajole me (as a Christian-turned unbeliever) back into the Christian Faith.

"Tunde Aina, I have a message for you from God," he proclaimed from the pulpit to the hearing of the entire congregation. He continued, "Come back to your source. We know what role you played in the Church in those days. God still loves you. He is not saying you must return to the Christ Apostolic Church, but it's imperative that you come back to the Body of Christ."

That Pastor took the advantage of being on the pulpit to play out this most unwelcome tactic of intimidation. Without minding the rest of the congregants, he devoted most of what he had to say to the need for me to return to church! How awful! He knew I wouldn't have a right of reply, and he chose to talk down from the pulpit. He should have come for a one-on-one meeting; rather, he chose a cowardly path. In the end, what did his effort achieve? Less than zero! Nonsense and ingredients!

The rest of the funeral proceeded without incident, and the post-interment reception was held inside the Assembly Hall of Ikeja Gramms yet again. That was how my siblings and I became orphaned in this life, following the departure of the vehicles that delivered us here!

A Flurry of Postings

The general posting of pool officers that happened in mid-2009 took me out of the Office of the Head of Service. For the first time in the course of my career, I was to work in core administration, having been posted to the Human Resource Management Department (Training & Staff Welfare Division) of the Ministry of Police Affairs. I reported to the Ministry's Headquarters at Phase 1 Complex of the Federal Secretariat, and resumed work two weeks later. I relished the experience of being in core administration, because prior to that posting, all my 20-year experience in the civil service had been in budget. I needed a new frontier. But my stay in HR was short-lived.

Barely a month into my assumption in Police Affairs, I attended the Town Hall meeting of all staff. During question and answer session, the Perm Sec of the Ministry, the amiable Mr Oyemomi, recognised me, and asked that I see him after the meeting. Wondering what he wanted of me, I went with him to his office.

"I'm glad to know that you're now in my Ministry," the Perm Sec started, "Which Department?"

"HRM, sir. Staff Welfare."

"That's not acceptable. With your budgeting experience, I need you in my Budget Division here. Our Budget is in a mess. I need you to help straighten things out."

"No problem, sir."

The Perm Sec summoned the Director (HR), and handed me over to him with instruction that I be redeployed to Budget Division with immediate effect.

"Did you know *Oga* before?" asked the DHR on our way to his office.

"Yes. I worked with him in the service-wide Committee for the Monetisation of Fringe Benefits set up by the Body of Head of Service and Permanent Secretaries; and, because of my budgeting experience, I developed the MS-Excel format used in collating the affected staff benefits."

"I see. I will certainly miss you, Aina. I was beginning to enjoy your contribution to the writing and vetting of our minutes of the Top Management Meeting."

"You know, of course, it's not my making."

"Yes, I know. I'm not blaming you. Keep up the good work. At this rate, the sky is your limit."

"Thank you, sir."

And that was how I spent only six weeks in HR before being redeployed to the Budget Division under the Director, Finance & Accounts. It was while there that I successfully wrote the centralised qualifying test for shortlisting of applicants for the Australian Scholarship Award. But even that posting didn't last long.

Barely four months into my new schedule, I received a call from my erstwhile boss, Mrs Browne, who had become the Deputy Director (Planning, Monitoring & Evaluation) in the Ministry of Petroleum Resources.

"I'm calling to ask if you wouldn't mind working with me again. I need you here in Petroleum Resources," she said.

"How's the place, Ma'am?" My curiosity got the better of me.

"We're in Block D of NNPC Towers. Beautiful, serene. You will love it. My Division is in charge of the bilateral affairs of the Ministry, as well as project monitoring. You'll also have opportunities for official foreign trips. Are you interested?"

"Yes, please. Count me in." I nearly interrupted her out of sheer excitement.

And, she clinched it!

I had some trouble convincing my Perm Sec to let me go. He threatened to go to the OHSF to reverse my latest posting, as I had been in Police Affairs for only five months. In the end, he reluctantly allowed me to leave. By mid-December, I had become an official of the Ministry of Petroleum Resources. It was from there that I attended the very exciting final selection interview for the Australian Awards conducted at Protea Hotel, Maitama.

By this time, I had come to the realisation that the civil service job that I had tried desperately to avoid, and to quit even after accepting it, was bent on keeping me. Suddenly, I didn't mind being kept there anymore. I was being sought after, and the prospects were looking good. My primary philosophy of life had been this: whatever was worth doing at all was worth doing well, which had translated into positive outcomes. Now, frontiers outside the shores of Nigeria were calling my name. I knew that I would soon go international, as I could feel it in my bones already that Australia was beckoning on me!

CHAPTER 15: BEYOND MY FATHER'S FARM

"It is a child who has never been to another man's farm that usually proudly proclaims that his own father's farm is the biggest and the best." ~ Yoruba proverb.

Landing in Australia

2009 came to a close with a dose of good news for me: I emerged as one of the 11 eventual winners of the Australian Scholarship Awards! Winning a fully-funded scholarship to undergo a Master's Degree programme in any Australian university of my choice was, indeed, an amazing Christmas present for my entire family. We, the awardees, would be given study leave with pay by the Head of Service, but we were required to sign a bond promising to return to Nigeria on completion of our respective studies in Australia. In the meantime, we were invited to attend an all-expenses-paid Pre-Departure Briefing (PDB) to be held at Alisa Hotel, North Ridge, Accra, Ghana, in mid-January 2010.

We flew Abuja-Lagos-Accra. Both flights went smoothly, and we were picked up at the Kotoka International Airport by the organisers. It was by sheer coincidence that Kunle (my brother) and I met in Accra. He had come for a different official engagement and we happened to be lodged in the same hotel.

The PDB was intended to prepare us for living in Australia, and to give us a breakdown of what our sponsors expected of us prior to and during our studies. Having won the scholarship, they made it clear that it would be our responsibility to secure admission into any of the acceptable courses available in universities across Australia. We were also expected to fill all necessary application forms and submit them together with the original supporting documents, inclusive of academic transcripts. After going through the brochures of a number of recommended Australian universities, I settled for the University of Queensland (UQ) – a university that had just celebrated its centenary in Brisbane, Australia.

On return to Nigeria from Ghana, I had to travel to the Obafemi Awolowo University to enable me apply for and collect copies of my academic transcripts. All our applications for admission and other documents were eventually submitted to the Australian High Commission (AHC) in Abuja for onward transmission to Pretoria, South Africa, for processing, as the AHC did not run consular services in Nigeria. By April, I finally received all the required approvals, including a two-year Australian (multiple-entry) Student Visa, and UQ admission for a Master's programme in Governance & Public

Policy commencing in July. My e-flight tickets arrived later, showing that the departure date had been set for 30 May 2010.

On D-Day, Dr Taribo, Malami, Ndidi and I flew from Abuja-Lagos-Johannesburg, South Africa, where we had a 14-hour wait before connecting to Sydney flight via Qantas Airline. From Sydney, I was on my own. The Australian Immigration formalities were thorough and somewhat hectic; so hectic that I missed my local flight to Brisbane, but was given a boarding pass for the next flight without any fuss. On stepping into the airplane, I realised that, for the first time in my life, I had stepped into a place where the only black face was mine. Not that it mattered though, as I saw friendly-looking faces all around me. I was seated next to Professor Smith, a retired Australian lecturer, who wasted no time in opening up a conversation with me.

"Hello, I'm Smith, Professor Smith."

"Nice meeting you, Prof Smith. I'm Tunde Aina." I responded warmly.

"Where are you from?"

"Nigeria."

His face lit up, "Oh, that's nice. I was in Nigeria in 1956 with the Queen's delegation. At that time, I was working with the British Parliament…."

And so, our conversation continued throughout the flight, during which time I found out that Prof Smith returned from England to Australia in 1982 and lectured at the University of Sydney until his retirement in 1993. He was delighted to know that I was going to be a master's student at UQ. "Really?" He squealed, "That's where I had my first degree in 1954." Before long, we were preparing to land at Brisbane International Airport.

"You're welcome to Brisbane. Enjoy your stay with us" were his parting words.

"I hope to. Thank you very much."

It was 7.15 pm on Tuesday, 1 June that I emerged into the arrival terminal at the Brisbane International. I was happy to find out that a driver from UQ was waiting for me. He carried aloft a card showing "Babatunde Aina for University of Queensland", making it easy for me to locate him.

"There you are. I'm Babatunde Aina." I announced, flashing my passport.

"You're welcome. I'm to take you to Roamer Brisbane. Is that right?"

"Yes, please."

That was how I passed my first night at Roamer Brisbane, a hostel accommodation I had pre-booked from Nigeria. I turned in at about 11 pm and had a sound, dreamless sleep till about noon the following day. I then

spent the rest of the day just lolling and looking around the City of Brisbane. It was the beginning of an exciting new experience at the other end of the world, right down under!

Introductory Academic Programme

The next morning, I headed to UQ, where I was warmly welcomed at the office of the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID), sponsors of the scholarship programme. I received the needed letter of introduction to take to the University and another letter to the campus branch of the Australian & New Zealand (ANZ) Bank, where a student account with a deposit of AU$5,000 had already been opened in my name prior to my arrival. All I had to show to activate the account was my passport and letter of introduction. As the Australian Dollar was almost equivalent to the USD, I felt it was generous of our sponsors to give each awardee that much money as an allowance to settle-in (get accommodation etc.), besides which we were being paid AU$1,000 fortnightly for upkeep.

My first Friday was spent searching for accommodation via the website link provided for that purpose on the UQ website. I eventually got a suitable one at Toowong, where I shared a 2-bedroom flat with a Rwandan, named Vedaste, a fellow AusAID student. I moved in on Saturday, just in time to settle in before the commencement of a six-week Intoductory Academic Programme (IAP), which was mandatory for all international students on AusAID Scholarship. Vedaste turned out to be a dream housemate, forthright, warm and generally very amiable.

The opening session of the IAP was scheduled to start at 10 am on Monday, 7 June. Vedaste and I arrived the UQ campus early to allow us look around before our programme. As we approached the Central Food Court, I saw ahead of me an unmistakable pair: Brown and Christie. Both of them were Ghanaians I had met during our PDB in Accra. We had exchanged contacts on finding out that all three of us had picked UQ as our university of choice in Australia.

"See who is here!" Christie exclaimed, brimming with smiles.

"Wow! It's Baba" Brown had insisted (while in Accra) on calling me Baba as a short form of my name.

"It's nice meeting you guys here. From Accra to Brisbane: how exciting!" I responded as we exchanged hugs. "Allow me to introduce my friend and housemate, Vedaste. He's a Rwandan."

All four of us moved around the campus and went together to the IAP venue. After registering at the forecourt, one of the officials moved closer and whispered to me.

"Would you like to remove your cap before you enter the hall?"

"Why? Is that a requirement?" I enquired.

"No. It's just that Aussies have a tradition of removing caps when going indoors."

"Good to know. We're supposed to be celebrating diversity here, aren't we? In my place, we go indoors with our caps or headgears on. So, I do not intend to remove mine. Thank you."

"You're welcome."

We entered the hall. Over 80 international students were already seated. The welcome session was about to begin.

"Celebrating diversity. I love that." Christie said, giggling.

The IAP was an intensive six-week course intended to familiarise international students with the academic expectations of the university, as well as provide a smooth transition into living in Australia. It was functional in its approach, as it helped participants to develop strategies of coping with the anticipated culture shock and other challenges. It also provided us with the unique opportunity of being able to share experiences and compare notes with fellow students drawn from several countries across the globe. The Cultural Day was unique in itself. It was, indeed, a celebration of diversity. I enjoyed every bit of it.

As part of the IAP, we undertook a course in Critical Thinking. The course lecturer, Dr Sussan Bailey, a Briton, was so impressed with my essay that she invited me for coffee.

She said, "I'm impressed. You scored the highest in my assignment. Obviously, you already have critical thinking capabilities. How so?"

"Thank you. I did a course in Logic during my undergraduate days and I'm already familiar with the principles of logical fallacies and how to avoid them. I guess that was helpful."

"Yes indeed. You attended which university?"

"University of Ife in Nigeria."

"Nigeria? Interesting. My first husband is a Nigerian."

Thus, we had a conversation around her first marriage, which she said failed because, contrary to their pre-marital agreement, her Nigerian

husband started insisting on having children. She noted that his insistence started on his return from a visit to Nigeria after five years of blissful marital experience without kids. Their difference led to a breakup and eventual dissolution of the marriage. We also had a conversation around the need for the application of critical thinking in our daily lives. I couldn't agree more with her on this, and I pointed out that it was my application of critical thinking that led to my leaving Christianity.

At that point, Dr Bailey chipped in, "Oh, you lost your faith due to critical thinking?"

"I didn't lose my faith. I threw it away when I found I had outgrown it. It wasn't a loss at all: it was good riddance." I said, smiling.

"So, what would you call yourself now?" She asked, looking serious.

"An agnostic. I might very well become an atheist soon. I feel I'm nearly there." I was being completely honest with her.

"I understand you perfectly. Even I am able to remain a Christian only because I have managed to separate my religious beliefs from my knowledge. It's like having to partition one's brain, so that the two don't mix." Dr Bailey suddenly looked remorseful, almost as if she regretted her decision to remain in the faith.

"I found I couldn't do that. The cognitive dissonance I experienced wouldn't allow me." I concluded.

Other interesting parts of the IAP included group visits to the iconic Brisbane Eye, Kangaroo village, the Brisbane Planetarium (which I fell in love with and knew I had to revisit many times) and the world-renowned Koala Sanctuary. Many in the group expressed the vain wishes that the IAP would not come to an end. It was as if they were intuitively dreading the rigorous academics bound to follow.

Coping with Life Down Under

As expected, the academic rigours soon commenced at the beginning of the new semester in July. The MGPP programme focused on issues of governance, and analysed how society could deal with policy problems, often by combining the resources of government, private and community sectors. As students, we developed practical knowledge combined with high level research skills and a critical, enquiring approach to questions of governance and policy development in the new millennium.

The overarching significance of economic analysis to public policy and governance was given due prominence, to enable students fully understand the language and major concepts of mainstream economic analysis as

applied to governance and public policy. The main rationale was to help international students better understand how mainstream economists think and how they advise governments and other organisations involved in public policy and broader governance issues. One of the core areas covered had to do with the examination of law as an instrument of governance. In recognition of the need for intra and inter-ethnic integration, especially in the developing world, courses in politics of development, peace-building and international relations also formed an integral part of the MGPP course content.

A note-worthy part of my experience in Australia had to do with the cosmopolitan nature of the Australian university environment. The University of Queensland admitted students from over 130 countries; and invariably, every class was like a mini-United Nations session, thus making the experiences of group works and field trips quite diversified and challenging, yet enthralling. It was equally gratifying that, at the end of the course, my cumulative GPA was 6.50 (out of a maximum of 7); and I was awarded a Certificate of the Dean's Commendation for High Academic Achievement in each of the three semesters of my programme.

Inevitably, many students who were not from English-speaking countries had quite some trouble coping with the demands of having to do critical thinking and analysis in a language they had recently learnt. In my class, a number of students from Southeast Asian countries like China, Vietnam and Philippines had this problem. Whenever I had the time, I was happy to help some of my coursemates proofread their assignments, but often had to turn down requests for such assistance from students outside my class. That was before I realised I could easily make quite some income by rendering such services. How did I find out?

One of my lecturers, Professor (Mrs) Ayoko, announced my name after her first class with us, requesting me to see her later. I did. She introduced herself as a Nigerian of Yoruba extraction and we exchanged greetings in our local language. She was to later invite me to her house to meet her husband (also a Nigerian professor, at the Queensland University of Technology) and children. I agreed without any hesitation. So, I visited their house in a high-brow part of the city, as agreed. After a nice lunch, my hostess opened conversation centred around university academics.

"You know, with your sound knowledge of English, you can easily make money from proofreading assignments and projects for other students."

"Really? I've been helping my fellow students proofread assignments without a charge." I said.

"Seriously? Even we – my husband and I – do that for our colleagues who pay for such services."

"That's cool. In that case, before leaving this country, I should be able to make a couple of millions rendering proofreading services." I retorted amidst bouts of laughter.

It was through the Ayokos that I also got introduced to an association named the Nigerian Community in Brisbane. I joined the community and soon became an active participant. I now had the luxury of relating with a number of Nigerians in faraway Bris City, including a medical consultant, Dr Komolafe and his fanimorous family. I couldn't help noticing, however, that it was at a Nigerian event scheduled to mark Nigeria's 50th Independence Anniversary that I first saw "prayer" as an item on the programme of activities. That was unthinkable among Aussies who strictly treated religious activities as personal.

"It seems you have a grouse against religion?" asked the man who sat next to me, on noticing my preference for a religion-free public event.

"As a matter of fact, I do. I am an atheist, and I have an axe to grind with the idea of throwing religion at me everywhere I go in Nigeria. I've had a break from that since I came to Australia, until now."

Did I just identify myself as an atheist? I was fast leaving God behind. I had long thought I would come to such an inevitability.

"In that case, I'll introduce you to the Rationalists Movement. It's a body of atheists, agnostics and free thinkers. They have a branch here in Brisbane." His words were music to my ears.

"Interesting. I would love that. Thank you, Mr…?"

"Longinus."

Longinus kept his promise and, in no time, I became a registered member of the Rationalists Movement. Their activities, which often included seminars, discussions and debates, made my stay down under even more enthralling. On an occasion, I was even turned into an emergency speaker for Freethinking at a Roundtable on the existence of God organised by a Christian association in Gold Coast. Of course, my arguments were for anti-theism, and I enjoyed every bit of that Roundtable.

Two Return Trips to Nigeria

By January 2010, I was already due for promotion to the post of Assistant Director, but contrary to my hope, the promotion examination did not hold before my departure for Australia. We only took a management development course examination, which Oronsaye (the then Head of Service) insisted was going to serve as a qualifying exam, eliminating candidates who failed to pass from being considered for promotion. What we didn't know, at that time, was

that Oronsaye's stance had put him on a collision course with the Federal Civil service Commission (FCSC).

I responded to the invitation to write the 2010 promotion exam issued by the FCSC, by travelling to Nigeria with Emirates Airline, via Dubai, UAE. I was determined to avoid the inevitable 14-hour wait, which I experienced at Johannesburg during my first trip to Australia. I joined other eligible candidates in registering and preparing for the exam. Three days to the exam, my group was having a discussion at the Federal Secretariat when a most unexpected news broke.

Someone who had just received a phone call announced, "Our promotion exam is no longer holding. It's been postponed indefinitely. A circular to that effect is already out."

"What? It had better be a joke" a lady in the group whimpered, almost bursting into tears. "I came for this exam all the way from Lagos."

I turned to the lady and said, with as much equanimity as I could muster, "Take it easy, ma'am. I came for this same exam all the way from Australia. What should I say?"

The lady just shook her head and sighed, "Hmm, Nigeria!"

My trip to Nigeria was regarded by AusAID as a private trip and was not covered. As my Master's course was a three-semester programme, I wasn't entitled to a reunion trip with my family. That was a privilege reserved for only those undergoing a four-semester course. I had to pay out-of-pocket. That was how I spent a whooping AU$3,200 flying to Nigeria in the hope of writing an examination that ended up being cancelled at someone's whim. What a fruitless trip! Did I just say fruitless? Well, not quite. I had a consolation in being able to see my family. And I must return again before the end of the year, if I cared about writing the promotion exam.

I returned to Australia in August, with ardent hope that my semester would not be interrupted again before its end in November. In that, my hope was fulfilled, as a new circular issued three months later fixed the exam date for December. Good! I would have completed my first semester and would be home-bound for the December holidays, anyway. By mid-November, I was Nigeria-bound again. This time, the exam was held successfully. "Tunde, you've spent AU$6,400 just to come for this exam (exclusive of the cost of local flights between Lagos and Abuja). So, you'd better come out tops. No excuses. Understand?" No. Nobody said that to me. That was I admonishing myself!

UQ was on its long vacation from November ending till February 2011. Thus, with the promotion exam put behind me, I had the opportunity of enjoying the Christmas holidays with my family in Abuja. It was in the news that

I watched the sad incident of the overflowing of the Brisbane River, causing massive flooding that ravaged beautiful Brisbane in early February 2011. Toowong was badly affected; but luckily, I had changed accommodation about a month prior to my returning to Nigeria in November.

It was in my quest for an accommodation that would be all-inclusive that I had relocated to House 84, Boundary Road, Indroopilly, a surburb of Brisbane. My Toowong accommodation required us to pay our utilities bill, including internet, hot water, gas and electricity. When I first got those bills in Toowong, I almost fainted. Prior to that, I thought I had a relatively cheap accommodation. I was shocked to realise that the cumulative utilities bills were almost as expensive as the rent. I was done with Toowong. There must be places where the rent would be all-inclusive of the utilities. I was right. I didn't even have to search for long before getting such a place at Indroopilly.

In relocating to Indroopilly, I had to part ways with Vedaste. He chose to remain closer to the campus, despite the prohibitive costs. I would miss Vedaste, no doubt; but for me, it was important to make savings – good savings – from my monthly allowance of AU$2,000. Didn't they say it was calculated to keep a family of four? I was alone in Australia, and I didn't see why I should finish all my money on living expenses of accommodation, utilities and feeding. There must be money for socialisation, travels and savings. At an all-inclusive weekly rent of AU$145, Indroopilly, though farther out, would allow me have all that.

I returned to Brisbane in February to meet five new housemates: a Colombian, two Tanzanians, a Chinese and an Australian. All six of us (all male except one of the Tanzanians) were Masters' students at UQ. The fully-furnished duplex had six self-contained rooms. We had common areas: two living rooms, a huge kitchen, a court yard and a massive rear garden decked in grass, trees and flowers. I fell in love with the house on first inspection.

"When I got your online application for a room in my house, I almost turned it down," the landlady had told me when we met. "I didn't have a good experience with the last Nigerian who took my house, but I changed my mind on meeting you. Something tells me I wouldn't have any problems with you."

"Thanks for your confidence in me. You won't be disappointed."

It was to be my home for the next 14 months. And what a refreshing home it was!

Holiday in Sydney

The next semester holiday came in June; and because I had had to travel twice to Nigeria – at huge cost - during my first semester, my wife and I

had agreed that I could stretch my stay till the end of my programme. My friend and fellow AusAID awardee, Dr Taribo, who was doing his Masters in Public Health at the University of Sydney, suggested that it would be worth my while to have a vacation in Sydney, and I thankfully agreed. With iconic places like the Opera House, the Harbour Bridge and the Blue Mountains to visit, Sydney would certainly be a great experience.

I decided to go by rail and return by air, as this would give me an opportunity to experience inter-state train ride in Australia. So, off to Sydney I went via the Express Train on June 8. It was a good 13-hour ride for the about 940 km journey. We got into Sydney around 8.30pm but the trip was not boring by any means. There was a nice restaurant and a games room. I played a couple of chess games during the ride. When I showed interest by watching those playing chess, an elderly man invited me to play. It was an opportunity I couldn't turn down. I simply love playing chess.

The man, named Harrison, opened the game with a *Knight pawn*, followed by a double *fianchetto*, and I knew instinctively that I was going to beat him. A single *fianchetto* at the beginning of a game was time wasting enough, making you lose tempo, but a double one? I took control of the centre in no time, blocking-in his *Bishops*; and in less than 30 minutes, through a *discovered check* tactic, I took his *Queen*. The game was over 10 minutes later: I won relatively easily.

"Nice one" said Harrison, offering a handshake. "Don't go yet. I have a surprise for you." He raised his voice, "Care for a game, Rick?"

A young man, who appeared to be in his early twenties came over to the table. Harrison introduced the young man as his son, Rick, and yielded his seat to him.

"You guys would make a great match." He announced before heading to the restaurant.

I played white, and I opened the game with a *P-Q4*, followed by a *Queenside gambit*, which Rick declined. He went on to build an almost impregnable defence. I could sense that this would certainly be a tough match. By mid-game, Rick was a *pawn* ahead, due to a not-so-well-thought-out sacrifice I had made to unsettle his *castling*. It was a ding-dong affair until the end game, where Rick showed his dexterity in deploying a *Knight attack*. Through a series of maneuver, he was able to swing a *fork* on my *King* and *Rook*. I lost the *Rook* for a *Knight*. From then on, playing any catchup became impossible for me, and I lost to a worthy opponent in a game that took almost two hours.

"You have avenged your father. Congratulations, Rick."

Taribo had kept his word: he was waiting for me at the train station by the time I disembarked in Sydney. Having graciously offered to host me for the duration of my 10-day stay in Sydney, he took me to his apartment. We talked very late into the night and eventually slept till about 11 the following morning. We went to Woolsworths and bought lots of drinks and enough groceries to last a month. We could afford to feast. And why not? You only live once!

From the third day, it was all fun outings for us both. Over the next six days, we bought tickets and visited tourist attraction spots, including: the Art Gallery of New South Wales; the all-exciting Sydney Aquarium; a walk at the Luna Park and the Taronga Zoo; the Australian War Museum, where we had the opportunity of getting into actual battle tanks and submarine used during World War II; the Sydney Eye Tower and its scary, dazzling height; and the iconic duo of the Opera House and the Sydney Harbour Bridge.

The following week was for trips: we took a boat ride to Manly, where we visited the Manly Beach and the Surf School. Next was a trip, in a tourist double-decker bus, to the Sydney Blue Mountains, where we partook in the dopamine-challenge ride of the cable car over the scenic world and valleys. This was a full-day tour on its own, for which we paid AU$70 each. The package included a hike to the statues of "the three sisters", from which range, sunset was, indeed, a sight to behold! We rounded it all off with a late dinner before finally returning to base around midnight, by which time I was totally exhausted from the trip and hike. Wow! What an adrenalin-pumping experience!

My 10-day holiday in Sydney was over in a jiffy! Why didn't I make it two full weeks? Taribo was an excellent host, and he made my holiday the best I had ever had. I wish it would not end. But all things – good or bad – had expiry dates; and by 18 June, my return trip to Brisbane was due. It was a good thing that I had bought a Qantas air ticket for my return to Brisbane. How else could I have gone through another 13-hour train trip, after my grueling escapades in Sydney! Taribo saw me off to the airport to catch my flight.

"Thank you very much indeed, for giving me the most memorable holiday ever. It was fun all through." I told him, as we hugged each other.

"You're welcome. It was my pleasure, bro." He assured, parting me on the back.

"When you do come to Brisbane, I'll surely retaliate!"

"No problem. Expect me during the mid-semester break in September."

"Cool."

Farewell to Brisbane

Taribo didn't eventually make his promised September trip. I had to make other arrangements to occupy myself during that break. I paid a couple of visits to the Brisbane Planetarium, together with Alejandro (my Colombian housemate) and Winnie (another Nigerian AusAID awardee who joined us in 2011). The virtual experience of being able to leave the earth on a guided tour of our solar system was so enthralling that I couldn't get enough of it. Since my secondary school days, I had always wished I could have the opportunity of being able to go into space, if only to experience weightlessness and see our Earth as it floats in space. Even if that dream was not realisable for me, at least I had a virtual experience of it. It was magical!

As we began to round off our final semester, I had a rather strange encounter with one of my coursemates, Hussaini. He was an Afghan who had so fallen in love with the peaceful life of Australia that he dreaded going back to his home country. He and I, along with two others, were to work together on a group project. As the group leader, I assigned responsibilities to all members, to enable us work as a team. But my Afghan friend just couldn't be bothered to carry out his part. I was concerned because, in a group project, all members of the group would be given the same score, as they were expected to make a single submission. I called Hussaini aside.

"Why are you holding us back by not doing your assigned part? Do you want us to fail?" I asked, curious about his nonchalant attitude.

"I'm sorry it would affect everyone, but the truth is that I'd like to fail one or two courses" was his shocking response.

"You'd like to fail? Why?"

"It has suddenly dawned on me that the completion of my Masters programme means an inevitable return to my home country. Since I'm here with my family, we'd like to stay here for as long as possible. We don't want to go back to Afghanistan."

Hussaini went on to describe the sorry state of the level of insecurity in his home country, and how, since he came to Australia, he and his family had been sleeping with both eyes closed. He confessed that he hadn't imagined that life could be that serene and peaceful anywhere on Earth. He had thought that such a beautiful experience was only achievable in a post-life paradise. Who would want to give that up? He concluded with a statement that brought tears to my eyes:

"Tundi, you would probably never know what it means to live in a country where, when your children leave the house for school in the morning, you don't know if you'll see them alive again."

I felt for him, and I had difficulty sleeping that night, as my mind kept tossing around the unimaginable experiences that could make a man become scared of returning home after studying abroad – so scared that he wanted to fail deliberately to prolong his stay. Nonetheless, I hated the fact that, despite my urging, he still refused to do his part of the project. As I was looking forward to returning to my family at home, and didn't want anything to prolong my stay in a foreign land (despite its beauty and grandeur), I had to do his bit of the project for him. Fortunately for me – but, perhaps, not for him – the group project score was an excellent one, a high distinction.

We finally rounded off in November but I had to wait for the week-long Graduation Ceremony, with mine billed for 12 December. It was a grand occasion which made me miss my family. A number of my friends, especially those not yet due for graduation, were on hand to give me their cheer and support. I spent the next few days doing some shopping before finally returning to Nigeria on 16 December 2011.

My Emirates flight from Brisbane via Dubai touched down in Lagos the following afternoon. Niyi's wife, Bola, and my secondary school friend, Tomi, were on hand to welcome me in Lagos. I wished I could pass at least a night in Lagos to see my siblings, but the yearning to get to my wife and children that same day was too strong. I caught an Arik flight to Abuja, where my Helen, Tide and Teni had been waiting anxiously to have me back. Their excited shrieks and screams were deafening, as I merged into their collective warm embrace on landing at the Nnamdi Azikwe Airport in Abuja.

It was my first time in Nigeria since my return to Australia early that year in February. There were lots of stories and experiences to catch-up on and share. I couldn't help but notice how it seemed that my girls had grown bigger overnight. It's often true the saying that, "East or West, home is best", especially for those of us who left our beloved family behind. It was, indeed, a sweet reunion!

CHAPTER 16: MY JOURNEY INTO ATHEISM

"Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is not omnipotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Then whence cometh evil? Is he neither able nor willing? Then why call him God?" ~ Epicurus

In this chapter, let me revisit some of my experiences as a seeker of truth. I have earlier touched on how my dissatisfaction with the Christian dogma led me out of the religion of my birth, and how it caused serious strain in my relationship with my dad. I not only became a Crossbearer (an adherent of the Grail Message), but was appointed as the Secretary of the Victoria Island Circle (under the leadership of Mrs Longe). I also had the opportunity of delivering a number of talks based on the Message.

I went that far because I had assumed that I had found a satisfactory berthing place – I had found a most comprehensive and satisfactory teaching, or so I thought. But I was wrong - dead wrong. The deep-seated curiosity in me would not allow me remain in one place for too long. I was a restless, universal soul, whose inner yearnings for spiritual fulfilment seemed incapable of being contained within the frontiers of any religion or teaching. After over nine years in the Grail Movement, I became restless again. The title of the opening chapter of the Grail Message came to me anew: "What seek ye?" So I asked myself: what seek ye again, Tunde?

Seeking the Light and Sound of God

Remember how, as an undergraduate, I had longed to attend an Eckankar introductory talk, but allowed myself to be bullied out of such thoughts by a respected roommate, Bro. Michael? Those thoughts never really went away. As a Crossbearer, I remained deeply curious about soul travelling. Why would the Grail Message discourage its adherents from having a soul-travelling experience, even after acknowledging its possibility? Wouldn't it be glorious being able to experience leaving your body behind without dying? Such thoughts would not leave me alone even after years of trying to suppress them. What would I do?

A friend told me about the spiritual practices of Lobsang Rampa, a Tibetan Monk (who was born as Cyril Hoskin, a British Canadian), and who claimed to be an embodiment of a Tibetan Lama. I felt drawn to his books, and read a number of them, including his best-selling *The Third Eye*. I even enrolled for his online mystical training course aimed at opening the so-called third eye and journeying into the spiritual dimensions of life. I did all the recommended spiritual exercises, and then what happened? Nothing! There

must be something I wasn't doing right. I needed a spiritual guide I could relate with personally. My prayers in that regard were soon answered.

A High Initiate of Eckankar, Engineer Ogbodo, soon became my housemate at my Maitama residence. When I told him about my desire to experience soul travelling, his response made me feel he was God-sent.

"Piece of cake. We, Eckists, soul travel every day."

"Every day? Really? How do I do that?" I was beside myself with excitement.

"Come with me to Eckankar. When you become a student of the Eck Master, you will love the experience." His words were reassuring.

I soon joined him. Within a year, I had become a registered member of Eckankar, the religion of the Light and Sound of God, acknowledging Sri Harold Klemp, the spiritual leader of Eckankar, as the *Manhanta*, the Living Eck Master. He alone had the ability to take me, under his protective wings, on soul travelling journeys into the inner planes and the Temples of Golden Wisdom! I considered myself very lucky indeed when I was allowed to pay my dues and have my first initiation, becoming a *chela* (student) of the Master!

I became so committed to the cause of Eck that Eckankar stickers were competing for space all over my car. I had a picture of the *Mahanta* hung conspicuously on my room wall. I travelled across the country in my quest for spiritual enlightenment, attending Eck Seminars, both regional and national. I never missed the Sunday Service or the Friday *Hu* Chant, which was supposed to be purifying and uplifting, bringing you closer to God. I kept faith with my *chelas'* classes and never joked with my daily spiritual exercises. But three years down the line: nothing! My quest for a soul travelling experience remained a mirage!

My frustration was beginning to tell. My teacher recommended more books on how to soul travel. I bought them all. I even bought a composite edition of the *Shariyat-Ki-Sugmud*, the main Eckankar scripture, in addition to several books authored by the *Mahanta* himself, including the fabulous *Autobiography of a Modern Prophet* and *The Art of Spiritual Dreaming*. I pored over Linda Anderson's *35 Golden Keys to spiritual freedom*, and even complied with the advice to shift my spiritual exercises to night hours – 3 am – just to minimise distraction. My best efforts notwithstanding, my fourth year in Eckankar crystalised my frustration, as nothing regarding soul travelling seemed to work for me, even after having my second initiation.

Each time we went to *chelas'* meeting, I would be surrounded by those narrating their wonderful soul travelling experiences with the Inner Master. Why was mine different? Did the *Mahanta* deem me unworthy? What was I doing wrong? All the Eckists around me couldn't possibly be hallucinating or lying about their experiences, could they? I was jealous of their experiences, and I

told many of them so. On my complaints of failure to soul travel, all I got from my teacher was: "The Living Eck Master knows best. Keep your trust in him. He will come to you at his own time."

Well, four years was a long time. This was supposed to be a piece of cake. I felt I was wasting my money, for all registered members had to pay the sum of $50 annually to renew their membership. My fifth annual renewal was now due. To be or not to be? I decided to sleep over it. That night, I had a very disturbing dream in which Fubbi Quantz, an Eck Master (not the *Mahanta*) seemed to be mocking me, whispering "It's your fault." My fault? How? As I held his robe appealing for his assistance, he shrugged off my hands and went on his way. That dream was not consoling.

The next morning, I woke up feeling sad, deeply so. I refused to enter the dream in my Dream Journal. I started blaming myself for wasting so much time, money and energy attending seminars, buying several books worth thousands of naira, and sending precious dollars to a spiritual organisation headquartered in the United States – all for nothing! For me, all my efforts were fruitless, as I failed to realise my main purpose of joining the religion. I borrowed myself some sense and screamed, "My mumu don do!" I was done with Eckankar! It was 27 August, 2006.

Stopover at Deism and Agnosticism Stations

For a few months, I gave myself a break. Thereafter, not satisfied with not having a philosophy or ideology of life, I considered Marxism, Solipsism, Virtue Ethics and Cultural Relativism for a while, but couldn't find purpose in any of them. Why couldn't I just be myself? But then, some questions kept coming back: Who are you? What is the purpose or meaning of existence? I realised that you could get as many answers as the number of people you asked. Were we then intended to develop our own meanings individually?

Meanwhile, I was now religionless. But what could be wrong with that? Why must we have or be adherents of any religion? Could Virtue or a commitment to not harm fellow human beings not be a way of life (or a philosophy) itself? I remembered having read the classic work of Thomas Paine, *The Age of Reason* years ago, recalled that it propagated an idea called Deism, which entailed a belief in God without a commitment to any religion. I thought I would love that. So, I went for it.

Deism is a philosophical position that holds that God created the universe, and then left it to operate according to natural laws. Deists do not accept the idea of an interventionist God who could distort his natural laws by answering prayers. Consequently, they do not pray. Great! That was what I wanted. I'd always thought that if God already knew what everyone of us

needed or wanted, what was the use praying for anything? Prayer seemed to me to be an attempt to manipulate God by telling him what to do. It seemed as though the petitioner, not satisfied with the turn of events, was telling God: Are you blind? Can't you see that my child is ill? Or, can't you see I need a job, or food or clothing? It would be quite irresponsible of any parent to expect his/her children to fast or beg before making provisions for their needs, right? So, why treat God as if he were an irresponsible father who was failing in his responsibilities or needed to be reminded?

My position as a Deist didn't last long; it lasted less than two years. My growing knowledge of science and the fact of evolution laggardly, but surely, was beginning to cast doubt on the idea of a creator. I read Professor Richard Dawkin's books on Evolution: *Climbing Mount Improbable; The Magic of Reality;* and *The Greatest Show on Earth: Evidence for Evolution*. I followed up with Jerry Coyne's *Why Evolution is True*, among several others. The knowledge of evolution made me realise that the universe had a natural beginning, and that it was the ignorance of our fore-parents that made them attribute everything to God.

I recalled that, when our forebears didn't know where rain came from, they gave one god or other the credit. The same applied to the causes of natural disasters: tornadoes, earthquakes, tsunamis, landslides, sinkholes, thunders, lightning, name it. All unknown or misunderstood events, including solar or lunar eclipses and comet encounters, were simply classified as "acts of God". Nothing could be farther from the truth. As science began to shed light on all the ancient mysteries and to explain their natural causation, we began to roll back the hand of God. God was beginning to shrink in the scheme of things. The question then became pertinent: How are we now sure that there's any "hand of God" in the so-called mysteries of today? I continued my research and knowledge-seeking.

By the time I got to Lawrence Krauss' *A Universe from Nothing* and Victor Stengers' *God and the Atom: From Democratus to the Higgs Boson – The Story of a Triumphant Idea*, my doubts started giving me sleepless nights again. This time, my doubts were not about the authenticity of the Bible as the Word of God; they were about the idea of God itself. The God Hypothesis: could it stand up to scrutiny? Or, were we all just believers in God merely out of habit? I was on a new quest, and I was willing to follow wherever the evidence led. That was my new reality. By 2008, I redefined my position. I moved away from Deism to Agnosticism.

Agnosticism is the thought that the existence of God or any spiritual power, is unknown or unknowable. So, as an Agnostic, if I was asked anything about God, my response would be nil. I felt that we could not possibly know anything about God, but wanted to leave the possibility open even if it was beyond my ken. I soon realised, though, that were I asked a simple question:

Do you believe in God? "I don't know" could not be a good response. I had to be able to answer "yes" or "no" to such a direct question. My thoughts were in a turmoil, but I was prepared to suspend my conclusion in that regard, as I needed more conviction. My research continued.

The Question of Evil: Who is to Blame?

Several years ago, I read the disconcerting book, *Escape from Sobibor* by Richard Rashke, in which the author gave a grim account of the Holocaust, and how a handful of the prisoners were able to escape from the Nazi extermination camp in Sobibor during World War II. It's now common knowledge that the Nazis exterminated over 6 million Jews, including women and children, during that pogrom across several death camps in Eastern Europe. When one remembers that the Jews were the so-called "God's chosen people", one is bound to ask: Why would God allow anyone carry out such genocide against his people?

I felt personally touched when, on 25 December 2011, Boko Haram terrorists in Nigeria carried out the dastardly act of bombing St. Teresa Catholic Church in Madalla, Zuba, Niger State in Nigeria. The incident, which claimed over 30 lives and injured several others, happened while the congregants were celebrating Christmas Day Mass. Several such attacks happened across the country both before and after that incident. Whenever such an incident occurred, is it too much for anyone to ask: Is there an omniscient, omnipotent God who knew the attack was being planned, but chose to watch as his enemies massacred his worshippers in his own house?

Following that incident, I did a Facebook post asserting as follows:

> *A God who fails to protect his children, but watches as his children are bombed in his house, is a useless God. Only his non-existence can excuse him!*

Expectedly, many believers nearly ate me raw for being so candid. Some friends and family members even blocked me thereafter. But, really, let's face it: Should a human being who has the means of stopping such an attack - say a military man - fail to stop it to save innocent lives, what would we think of him? If we would not make excuses for human failure to do the right thing, why do we keep making silly excuses for God? Or, could it be - as some of us already suspected - that God is just a figment of human imagination?

Such disasters befalling worshippers happen across various religions. For instance, on 10 August 2015, at least 27 worshippers were killed in a stampede during Pushkaralu Hindu Festival, while struggling to bathe in the Godovari River in Southern India. Similarly, on 11 September 2015, a crane toppled over at Mecca's Grand Mosque, killing at least 107 people and injuring 238

worshippers. Such disasters are not uncommon across the world. I recall how, while growing up in those days, we used to make jest of traditional worshippers for following gods that had eyes but could not see, and had hands but couldn't save their followers. Now, can anyone sincerely declare that there is any difference between the traditional gods of old and the ones being worshipped today?

Besides, there are countless cases of innocent children, including those just a few months old, being raped, and others murdered in cold blood by mindless criminals. Can anyone convince me that we have a supposed "Father who art in heaven" and who was aware of the planning and execution of such crimes but didn't raise a finger to protect the innocent? Were a security personnel to witness such crimes but fail in his duty of care or protection, would we excuse him for any reason?

That there is evil in our world is evident; that there's a lot of man's inhumanity to man isn't in doubt. What is not so certain is the question of the responsibility for the pervasive evil: who is to blame? It's a perennial question concerning which theologians have argued for millennia.

On the one hand, philosophers like Aristotle and Epictetus propounded the idea of compatibilist free will and contended that human beings should bear the burden of the moral responsibility for their actions, as they emanate from earlier voluntary decisions. Epictetus supported this notion by arguing that people have control over their actions because nothing hinders them from choosing. On the other hand, advocates of determinism, like the Stoics and Alexander of Aphrodisias, believed that every event is causally determined by God; and that the application of free will can only be incompatibilist in nature. This was contradicted by Epicurus who argued that causal determinism is incompatible with human freedom.

Thus, the question of human free will as an explanation for why God does not interfere in human affairs is quite debatable. However, I cannot imagine why those who believe in the efficacy of prayer also use such an argument; for if you serve a God who allows criminals kill believers because they're exercising their free will by so doing, why then do you pray for divine intervention in anything? But, let us leave the evil brought about by man's inhumanity to man for a while. What about natural evil, otherwise referred to as "acts of God"? Who are we to blame? In examining some of the natural evils that surround us, let us go back in time to prehistoric era which presents us with some interesting scenarios.

Extinction Events as an Eye-Opener

It wasn't until I delved into Earth's geological history that I got to know about mass extinction events, leading to periods of significant biodiversity loss. I read a lot and watched several science documentaries, from which I learnt that there had been five major mass extinctions and several minor ones throughout Earth's 4.5 billion-year history. The Big Five included:

- the Ordovician Silurian Extinction (over 443 million years ago), during which 85% of living species were lost, mainly due to glaciation and sea level changes;
- Late Devonian Extinction (about 375-360 million years ago), which led to the loss of about 75% of species globally, due to sea-level changes and oceanic anoxia;
- End-Permian Extinction (about 252 million years ago) was the most devastating for life on earth, as it led to the loss of 96% of marine species and 70% of terrestrial species, due to massive volcanic activities, climate change and methane releases;
- End-Triassic Extinction (over 200 million years ago), caused by climate and sea-level changes, resulted in the loss of 80% of living species; and
- Cretaceous-Paleogene Extinction (65 million years ago) brought about by the Chicxulub asteroid impact, in which 75% of life's species, including dinosaurs, were lost.

Besides the foregoing, there had been relatively minor but significant mass extinction events, like Ediacaran Extinction, which resulted from the oxygenation of the atmosphere; the Cambrian-Ordovician Extinction, caused by sea-level changes; and the Middle Jurassic Extinction that arose from volcanic activities. It is estimated that 97-98% of all species that ever lived on earth have gone extinct as a result of the mass extinctions and other natural activities!

Naturally, the knowledge that such mass extinctions had been our lot on Earth raised questions in my mind: Were such mass extinctions necessary for the continuation of life on Earth? Does the universe have a Creator who pre-planned that such natural disasters should wipe out his creatures? Why create millions of species only to wipe them out? What was the purpose of it all? Even in our age, we're still threatened by asteroid impact, gamma ray bursts, solar flares and several other natural disasters and diseases, to what end?

Benevolence or Malevolence

I started questioning the rationale for any god to create parasitic animals that could only spread diseases and death. Why would God create

mosquitoes, for instance? What about all the deadly pathogens that used to kill our fore-parents in their prime? Remember those days before the age of immunisation when over 60% of children born would die before the age of 5? Why was God creating human beings just to die in infancy? Why do we have pediatric cancer? What did all those living things of pre-historic era do to deserve being wiped out in mass extinction events? They didn't eat 'forbidden fruit', did they? Why create them in the first place? These issues and countless others don't make any sense, yet I was supposed to believe there is a rational mind responsible for the universe? Does a rational mind behave irrationally?

When I was in Australia, I became acquainted with a couple whose only son (a boy of 8) suffered an infestation of *Naegleria fowleri*, also known as "brain-eating bacteria"! This is a type of free-living amoeba that causes a destruction of brain tissues in infected people, often leading to inflammation, hemorrhage and death. The boy's parents watched him die, killed by a living organism that was purportedly created by God. There are several similar cases all over the world. Tell me: Which kind of God created *Naegleria fowleri*? I need to know. For if God created that, how could you bow down in pretended worship of such a god?

According to World Health Organisation, in 2009, an estimated 250,000 children under the age of 5 died from malaria in Nigeria alone. The global figure for that year was put at 781,000, most of which occurred in African Region. It is common knowledge that female Anopheles mosquitoes need human blood to produce eggs; their male counterparts do not bite, as they feed on nectar, water and plant sap. Other mosquitoes spread diseases like Zika, dengue fever and others. Now, I beg you: Was the female Anopheles mosquito or *Plasmodium falciparum* (the deadliest malaria parasite) created by God? Why couldn't the omnipotent God make the Anopheles feed on nectar, water or plant sap, like the male mosquito? Why do they need human blood to produce their eggs, thereby spreading diseases and death, especially among innocent children? Was God responsible for that? And I'm expected to love such a being?

Mycobacterium tuberculosis is the world's most leading infectious disease responsible for over 1.7 million annual deaths worldwide. As much as 13% of cases are resistant to antibiotics, and about 6% are unresponsive to treatment. What about *S aureaus* which has been the leading cause of death in 135 countries? Or *S pneumonia*, the pathogen associated with the most deaths in children below 5? Did a supposed Intelligent Designer create *acanthamoeba*, a parasite that survives only by eating eyes? How intelligent can that designer be who made life forms thwart, eat or kill other life forms for survival?

So, the so-called "Father of the fatherless" looks on as bacteria, viruses and other pathogens he created stifle lives out of little children? Does that

God hate children especially? Why else would he create them only to wipe them out before they could even commence their lives? Does that sound like someone who has a purpose for creating us? Were some people purposely created as food for pathogens? Why would the "Eye that never sleeps" be blind to the whole-sale extinctions of lives he supposedly created? Such a sightless Eye might as well close in deep slumber, coma or even death! But we're supposed to be filled with admiration and praises for him? Are you kidding me? If mass extinctions, natural disasters and pathogenic diseases don't make us ask these questions, I guess nothing else would. By now, I'm sure you've got my drift.

Removing the Blinkers

Throwing away the religious indoctrination of one's birth has never been an easy task, especially for those of us brought up in hyper religious environments as in Africa. At some point, by the beginning of 2011, I found myself tottering between Agnosticism and full-blown Atheism. I realised that I couldn't possibly claim a belief in a God I thought wasn't in existence. And what would such a position make me?

My interest in Astronomy brought up more interesting issues. It just didn't seem to make sense to me that a supposed All-wise God created the hundreds of billions of galaxies in the observable universe. It's mind-boggling to contemplate that each of those galaxies has hundreds of billions of stars, many of which are much bigger than our local star (the Sun). Now, just imagine, if you can, the following facts:

- The Sun's energy is radiated in all directions, but only a minuscule portion (less than 0.0000005%) reaches Earth's atmosphere, out of which the Earth absorbs about 70%.
- The amount of solar energy that reaches Earth, called the solar constant, is just about 1,370 watts per square metre; and each hour, Earth receives 430 quintillion Joules of energy from the Sun, making it the primary source of energy for Earth's land, atmosphere, oceans, and biosphere.
- Stars, like the Sun, are continuously "born" in giant molecular clouds called stellar nurseries, like the Orion and the Eagle Nebulae, and there are several billions of them in the observable universe, shunning out unimaginable Joules of energy into lifeless void for billions of years!
- Similarly, there are trillions of planets, some of which are Earth-like, scattered across hundreds of billions of galaxies, all rotating endlessly, and seemingly meaninglessly, in space. I will examine more of this in the next chapter.

Scientific evidence has demonstrated that all these stars, planets, and other monstrous giants like galaxies, black holes, quasars, pulsars, and neutron stars, are naturally formed. Imagine such gargantuan wastefulness! Naturally formed? That makes sense. Created by a God for a purpose? That, to me, makes no sense. I now seem to be getting the better of the cognitive dissonance that I had been battling with for decades. I started seeing the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel – the tunnel in which I had been enslaved by religion.

My final blinkers came off during my stay in Australia. Having experienced life in Nigeria – with all its challenges of crime, poverty and general insecurity – life in Australia was refreshingly different. While in Brisbane (at a time when their Prime Minister was an avowed Atheist), I lived in a house that had no lock on its main door; yet you could leave your laptop on a table in the living room and go away for weeks without having it stolen! In our deeply religious society, can you try that? Why is it that it is the so-called religious people that often seek to cheat others or siphon their common wealth?

Also, I'm often curious about why it's mostly the most religious societies – and by extension the most prayerful ones - that have the lowest indices of human capital development, but record the highest rates of violent crimes. Conversely, the least religious countries often have much higher human capital development indices and low crime rates. Why does poverty correlate so well with both higher religious devotion and violent crimes? Isn't it obvious that the prayerfulness of a nation has no correlation with its development? Were it not so, African countries would be the most developed nations on Earth, wouldn't they?

I know that some people will be quick to say: you can't just pray; you've got to put in the works too. But then, if individuals and nations that don't pray achieve their goals by doing the needful (the works), what is the value of prayer? Obviously, we do not need prayer to achieve success – be it in personal or national life – but majority of us engage in this redundant activity merely out of habit. The evidence is out there for anyone who cares to look. It's not easy, but I finally succeeded in removing the blinkers from my eyes.

It was Carl Sagan, in his widely-acclaimed best-selling book, *The Demon-Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark*, who stated that, if anyone made a claim that a "fire-breathing dragon lives in my garage", thoughtful persons would want to subject the claim to a test, naturally. But should the claimant go ahead to add that you cannot disprove the assertion because the dragon is invisible, incorporeal and spit heatless fire, thus undetectable by infrared sensor, or testable in any way, we could dismiss such a claim by default. He concluded by saying, "Claims that cannot be tested, assertions immune to disproof are veridically worthless." I couldn't agree more

with him; and, to me, the God-claim or hypothesis belongs in the same category.

All issues considered, the conclusion is inescapable: there's no verifiable, testable evidence for the existence of God, any gods, or any creator-beings. The God hypothesis falls down flat on the altar of proof. Little wonder, there have been thousands of them in the course of human history. Since people don't bother to ask for evidence, religious charlatans have manufactured gods by the thousands! Therefore, the only option left to me – the option that leaves me without any cognitive dissonance - is Atheism; and that is the path I now tow. It's time to dig another grave for the interment of the present-day gods, to let them rest in peace with the remains of all the fearsome ancient gods. Zeus, Jupiter, Odin, Thor and company, where art thou?

Let me conclude this chapter by reproducing here an apt article of mine titled ***"Graveyard of the Gods",*** which I posted on my Facebook page sometime in 2013. It runs thus:

> *The creation of gods has always been an exercise in ignorance, fear and savagery. In our primitive past, the gods controlled the wind, rainfall and sunshine. They were in charge of war, earthquakes, storms, thunder and lightning. Fertility was not bestowed on any woman except by the mercy of some deity. The gods were everywhere… their anger meant famine, drought and destruction; disease and pestilence were theirs for bestowal. The gods were powerful… they controlled our lives!*
>
> *In order to appease them, sacrifices had to be made; countless millions were slaughtered on the altars of these ancient gods. The people lived in fear, servitude and penury, not knowing who could be next to be sacrificed to a blood-thirsty god. Only the kings and priests lived in abundance. They were second only to the gods.*
>
> *Among the Romans, Jupiter was the King of Kings, the Lord of the gods… virgins were his delight! In the Greek world, Zeus reigned supreme, and could sleep with human maidens at will. Anyone who doubted his authority became history. To doubt the powers of the gods was to invite death on yourself and family! But who on earth still worships Jupiter today? Who is ignorant enough to pay obeisance to Zeus?*
>
> *Remember Nergal? The Babylonian god of plague and war. To win his favour, thousands of slaves perished … burnt alive for war fortunes! What about Tezcatlipoca of the Aztecs who consumed thousands of virgins a year? Name the woman who still revers Tezcatlipoca today, and I will show you a barbarian. Where is*

the man who, in the twenty-first century, still draws sword in the name of Nergal?

Visit any of the ancient peoples and the story is the same: human beings bowed in ignorance and fear before the imaginative constructs of their forefathers. On the demands of Moloch, the Ammonites wilfully sacrificed countless of their innocent children. The children of ancient Babylon suffered the same fate so that Marduk might be pleased; and whenever there was storm, Adad must be appeased.

Among the ancient Chinese, Yan Wang reigned supreme as god of death. The Egyptians cowed before Horus, their god of war, and sought to please Anuket to keep the Nile flowing. Thousands were laid to waste on the altar of the Sumerian god, the Mighty Anunaki; and among the English, Thor's voice boomed in storms and thunder.

Again, I ask, is anyone dull-witted enough, stupid enough, to worship any of these gods today? These gods once reigned supreme, but have now all fallen into oblivion; fallen from their mighty thrones, from grace into the dustbin of history. In their place have arisen other gods, no less mighty, no less demanding.

The graveyard of the gods awaits the remains of the modern-day gods. Our laughter at the ignorance of the ancients foretells the fact that our descendants – perhaps in a thousand years, perhaps in ten - would look back at today's worshippers, and wonder: how ignorant could they be?

CHAPTER 17: THE MAGIC OF NATURAL REALITIES

"The good thing about Science is that it's true, whether or not you believe it."
~ Neil deGrasse Tyson

"In the dark ages, people are best guided by religion, just as in a pitch-black night, a blind man is the best guide because he knows the roads and paths better than a man who can see. When daylight comes, however, it is foolish to insist on using blind old men as guide." ~ Heinrich Heine

I was going to give this chapter the title, "The World is Much Bigger", but on realising that it was to cover more than just the world, I changed the title. I have, unashamedly, borrowed this new title by slightly modifying the title of the book of one of my most-admired mentors, Professor Richard Dawkins, who wrote: *The Magic of Reality: How We Know What's Really True* (2011). This is a book I freely recommend to anyone who cares about nature and the universe, or about knowing the truth of life. The title now chosen serves as a testament to the wonders of our universe, as revealed by science.

My fascination with science – or more specifically, the universe – started in infancy. Remember how I used to look up to the "twinkle twinkle little stars", and how I used to be comforted by their mere sight in the sky? However, all that sense of wonder and curiosity seemed to ebb with the passage of time. I got a little of that interest back briefly during my acquaintance with Geography classes while in secondary school. Luckily for me, that ebbing of fascination wasn't permanent. During my undergrad days in Ife, my interest in scientific endeavours and findings simply exploded!

My Personal Big Bang

I was in my third year in Ife when I was compelled to offer a General Studies (GNS) course 005, titled "Man and Nature: The Scientific Adventure". Quite annoyingly (at least at the time), we were required to pass all courses, including the GNS ones, though the GNS results wouldn't count towards our CGPA. I kept wondering: What had an English student got to do with a science-based course? I concluded that the Ife University Authority must be quite mad! Little did I know that, for me, GNS 005 would be the beginning of a real life-time adventure - my romantic adventure with Science - which turned out to be an eye-opener.

For instance, it was during one of the "Scientific Adventure" classes that I first encountered two very basic scientific theories: Big Bang and Evolution. I was wowed! Prior to that time, Creationism had been the only idea of the origin of the world I had been exposed to. It was a given, so we were taught,

that a certain God created the heavens and the earth, and followed that up by creating all the living things, including the first human pair, Adam and Eve. I had no clue that any other persons had any different idea of the world. How could I? As a child, the Bible, as the only "book of truth" I knew, was my only science textbook. Where was this Big Bang thing coming from?

Under the guardianship of my parents and Sunday school teachers, I dismissed all the scientific "nonsense" as being "Luciferian teachings". A number of pastors assured me that, as we were in the end time, Satan had become desperate in misleading the vast majority of human beings, with a view to dragging them to hell with him. But I knew that my curiosity was far from being satisfied. How many more notions or ideas of the origin of the world were there that I hadn't even heard about? Obviously, there were contending hypotheses; but how would I know which of them, if any, was true? Did any of them have evidence for their claims? It was the lack of evidence to back up the claims made by the various religions that invariably made me realise that they were the ones propagating nonsense. Thus, my initial dismissal of scientific notions lasted only a while. My longing was only for the truth, even if it hit me with a big bang!

January 1986, the tabloids were awash with an impending National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) mission tagged the "Challenger Mission" to launch the second Tracking and Data Relay Satellite (TDRS-B). The NASA crew was to launch the satellite into space and use the opportunity to study the Halley's Comet, which had been predicted to pass close to the Earth's orbit at the time. The launch of the Challenger was scheduled for 28 January. Wow! A space launch in my life time? This was going to be something. I looked forward to it with all the earnestness I could muster… but it was not to be!

The Challenger space shuttle was launched, as advertised, on 28 January 1986, but it broke apart off the coast of Florida less than 90 seconds into its flight, killing all seven crew members on board. It was the first fatal accident involving an American spacecraft, after having experienced 24 successful space flights. I felt that that crew of seven, which included a high school teacher, died for humanity, as they were on a mission intended to improve telecoms infrastructure, among others. I was so touched by the Challenger disaster that I wept.

When, some weeks later (mid-March), I got to know that one of our university science lecturers had set up a telescope atop the Faculty of Science building to enable students catch a glimpse of the flyby of Halley's Comet, my interest knew no bounds. I needed to see the comet that only comes to our part of the universe once in 76 years. That would be a one-in-a-lifetime experience! So, I quickly went to join the long queue of interested students. Unfortunately, before I had the opportunity of peeking into the telescope, the

queue was badly disrupted. It became riotous, leading to a premature abortion of the exercise. Those who successfully had a peek described what seemed like a falling star with a blistering tail. Nonetheless, it was a surreal experience. It felt refreshingly warm that evidence-based knowledge could be within grasp. By now, I was relishing the taste of the scientific adventure, and I longed for more.

Expansion of Horizon

At some point, I became really wowed by NASA's accomplishments. How could they dare to even contemplate leaving the Earth and going to the Moon, a distance of about 384,400 km? What drives such daring missions? I sought and watched several documentaries on NASA's missions, including the one titled "NASA's Greatest Achievements". I recall that, some years ago, while watching a documentary on the Apollo Missions, a friend walked in on me. Unimpressed by such daring attitudes on the part of scientists, the friend hissed and blurted out:

"These scientists are too arrogant. What are they always looking for in space? Can't they just let us stay where God put us?"

I regarded him, shaking my head. He held two cell phones, and he loved watching English Premiership and EUFA Champions League matches live. I had to respond.

"You use internet daily, you have smart phones, and you watch live matches transmitted via satellite systems, and you have the audacity to ask such questions? You use the products of satellite technology, yet ask why scientists bother developing or deploying satellite systems and technology? Where do you imagine the satellites that transmit your signals are located?"

He must have realised the folly of his earlier statements and he just went mute thereafter.

As a matter of fact, NASA happens to be my favourite science agency. They have been at the forefront of space exploration for decades, and their achievements are truly mind-boggling. One of their most iconic accomplishments is the Apollo 11 Mission, where Neil Armstrong became the first person to set foot on the Moon. But that's not all - they've also sent numerous spacecraft to explore our solar system and beyond. For instance, the Voyager 1 and 2 Missions have been travelling through interstellar space for over 45 years, sending back incredible data and millions of pictures, despite being billions of miles away in inter-stellar space!

The Mars Science Laboratory, also known as Curiosity Mars Rover, has been roaming the Red Planet since 2012, discovering evidence of ancient

lakes and rivers. The Chandra X-ray Observatory has also made significant contributions to our understanding of the universe, capturing high-energy images of supernovae, black holes, and other celestial phenomena. Other rovers, like the Cassini, have been deployed to all the planets in our Solar System. Beyond that, a spacecraft, named Parker Solar Probe, has been sent to the Sun for "on the spot" investigation; and, having been well-prepared for its mission, it has become the first spacecraft to literally "touch" the Sun!

NASA's Space Shuttle programme, which ran from 1981 to 2011, was a remarkable achievement in reusable spacecraft technology. What about the International Space Station (ISS)? As a collaborative project with other space agencies, the ISS is a laboratory floating in space, orbiting the Earth. It has been continuously occupied by astronauts since 2000, and used for facilitating groundbreaking research in microgravity and lots more. More recently, the Artemis programme was launched with the primary aim of returning us (human beings) to the Moon and establishing a sustainable presence on the lunar surface.

You Can't Box Everyone

One of the problems I had growing up had to do with our tendency to want to put everybody in the same box, without taking due cognisance of the fact that we are all different in various ways. There are humans who possess the "unnatural" ability to see sounds, and there are those who can smell colours! I put the word "unnatural" in inverted commas because, strictly speaking, whatever nature allows to blossom or develop is natural. The implication is that, to my mind, all happenings in nature are natural, and nothing should be classified as unnatural or supernatural. To illustrate this fact, let's examine certain fascinating and bizarre phenomena in the animal kingdom. I will give just 5 examples (out of several) of some of the strangest features, anomalies, or behaviours ever observed among animals:

- Male Birthing: It blew my mind the day I first learnt that there are animals whose males give birth. An example is the Seahorse. The female transfers her eggs into the male's womb (brood-pouch). The male then fertilises the eggs and incubates them for 20-28 days before birthing hundreds of baby seahorses!
- Axolotl Regeneration: The axolotl (*Ambystoma mexicanum*) is a type of salamander that has the unique ability to regrow its limbs, eyes, and parts of its brain. It can even regenerate its spinal cord and repair damaged hearts.
- Sea Cucumber's Expulsive Defense: Some species of sea cucumbers (*Holothuroidea*) can expel their internal organs, including their

digestive system, as a defense mechanism. They can then regrow these organs over time.

- ❖ Mantis Shrimp's Superpower Vision: The mantis shrimp *(Stomatopoda)* has the most advanced eyes of any animal, with the ability to see up to 12 different colours and perceive polarised light. This allows it to detect the presence of other animals, even if they are transparent or reflective.
- ❖ Turritopsis dohrnii's Immortality: The Turritopsis dohrnii, also known as the "immortal jellyfish," is a species of jellyfish that can transform its body into a younger state through a process called trans-differentiation. This means that it can essentially revert to its polyp stage and grow back into an adult again, making it theoretically immortal.

Besides, some animals have the ability to change their sex or gender, a phenomenon known as sequential hermaphroditism or sex reversal. This can occur in various species, including fish, reptiles, amphibians, and invertebrates. For example, Clownfish are born male and can switch sex to become female. This process is called protandrous hermaphroditism. When the dominant female in a group dies, one of the males will undergo sex reversal and become the new dominant female. Even some species of Coral fish and Zebra fish can change sex in response to environmental cues, such as changes in water temperature or exposure to certain chemicals.

These examples illustrate the incredible diversity and complexity of life on Earth, and there are many more fascinating and bizarre phenomena waiting to be discovered and studied.

Telescopic Wonders

My passion about space exploration planted in me the seed of curiosity about the prospects of unveiling the wonders of our universe through the use of giant-sized telescopes, especially space-based ones. I read a bit about such topics as an undergrad, but it was the coming of the internet and satellite television that enabled me pursue this passion with renewed vigour. I found out that telescopes had been instrumental in revealing the awe-inspiring beauty and complexity of nature's creations. I became quite passionate with space telescopes, especially these four:

- ✓ Spitzer Space Telescope, which was launched in 2003, is an infrared telescope that uses a 0.85-metre primary mirror and a suite of instruments to study the universe in infrared light.

- ✓ Kepler Space Telescope: was launched in 2009 as a planet-hunting telescope that uses a 1.4-metre primary mirror and a photometer to detect exoplanets (earth-like planets) orbiting their host stars.
- ✓ Hubble Space Telescope: Launched in 1990, Hubble is one of the most successful space telescopes, with a 2.4-metre primary mirror and a suite of instruments that have made groundbreaking observations in visible, ultraviolet, and near-infrared light.
- ✓ James Webb Space Telescope was launched in 2021 as the successor to Hubble, with a 6.5-metre primary mirror and a suite of instruments to observe the universe in infrared light.

These and several other telescopes have succeeded in revealing the secrets of the cosmos, such that it is now obvious that what we can glean about the wondrous nature of our universe is limited only by the powers of our telescopes. Let me take the liberty of sharing just a few examples of the many wonders that telescopes have revealed to us. As technology continues to advance and new telescopes are built, we can expect to uncover even more secrets of the universe, expanding our understanding of the cosmos and our place within it.

- Galaxies and Galaxy Clusters: Telescopes like Hubble, Kepler, and Sloan Digital Sky Survey have revealed the existence of billions of galaxies, each containing hundreds of billions of stars. We have also discovered galaxy clusters, superclusters, and the vast network of galaxy filaments that crisscross the universe.
- Nebulae and Star Formation: The telescopic wonders of Spitzer, Herschel, and ALMA have shown us the breathtaking beauty of nebulae, vast interstellar clouds of gas and dust that give birth to new stars. We've witnessed the formation of stars, planetary systems, and even the detection of complex organic molecules, the building blocks of life.
- Black Holes and Dark Matter: Chandra, XMM-Newton, and the Event Horizon Telescopes have revealed the presence of black holes, those mysterious regions of space-time where gravity is so strong that not even light can escape. We've also discovered dark matter, an invisible form of matter that makes up about 27% of the universe's mass-energy density.
- Exoplanets and the Search for Life: In this regard, we owe our thanks to scientists who worked on telescopes like Kepler, TESS, and the more recent James Webb Space Telescope. These telescopes have discovered thousands of exoplanets, some of which are believed to be located in the habitable zones of their respective stars, where conditions are suitable for life as we know it.

- Supernovae and Gamma-Ray Bursts: Here, telescopes like the Swift Gamma-Ray Burst Mission and the Fermi Gamma-Ray Space Telescope have allowed us to study these incredibly powerful explosions, which can briefly outshine an entire galaxy. We now know more about the physics of these events and the role they play in shaping the universe.
- What about the Cosmic Microwave Background (CMB)? In this area, we have such massive telescopes as COBE, WMAP, and Planck, which have mapped the CMB, the residual heat from the Big Bang. This has provided a snapshot of the universe when it was just about 380,000 years old, allowing us to study the formation and evolution of our universe.
- Gravitational Waves: Here, the Laser Interferometer Gravitational-Wave Observatory (LIGO) and Virgo have directly detected gravitational waves, ripples in the fabric of space-time predicted by Einstein's Theory of General Relativity. This has opened a new window into the universe, allowing us to study cosmic events in ways previously thought impossible.
- The Most Distant Objects: Telescopes like Hubble, Keck, and the Atacama Large Millimeter/sub-millimeter Array (ALMA) have allowed us to observe the most distant objects in the universe, including galaxies, quasars, and gamma-ray bursts. These observations have taken us back in time to the early universe, just 400-500 million years after the Big Bang.
- What about the mysterious Asteroids, Comets, and Kuiper Belt Objects? In this regard, scientists have deployed, in addition to Hubble, telescopes like Pan-STARRS, the Catalina Sky Survey, all of which have now discovered countless asteroids, comets, and Kuiper Belt Objects (KBOs), providing insights into the formation and evolution of our solar system.
- The Universe's Large-Scale Structure: We have the Sloan Digital Sky Survey and the Dark Energy Survey Telescopes that have mapped the universe's large-scale structure, revealing the intricate web of galaxy filaments, voids, and superclusters that stretch across billions of light years.

The Universe Humbles Us

The accomplishments of NASA demonstrate its commitment to pushing the boundaries of space exploration and expanding our horizon across the universe. I always admire scientists who have, in various spheres of human endeavour, made their mark in ensuring that we continue to make progress, be it in the area of medicine, infrastructure or technology. There are very many

exciting advances being made in medical sciences right now. For instance, researchers are making great strides in understanding the underlying mechanisms of vascular diseases, such as hypertension and atherosclerosis, and how they can be managed using innovative treatments aimed at enhancing blood flow in patients with peripheral arterial disease. Additionally, in the area of cancer research, scientists are analysing the impact of tumor stage and histopathology on survival outcomes in esophageal cancer patients, with the goal of developing more effective treatment plans.

These is no doubt about the fact that we live in an exciting time, especially at the dawn of artificial intelligence. With the current advances in science and technology, I can't even begin to imagine what kind of world awaits us 30 years from now, or further on. I'm optimistic and excited for our future. Science is, indeed, the key to learning, improvement and progress for humanity. With all these accomplishments at our disposal, isn't it then obvious that, in this age of information, staying ignorant about almost anything is a matter of choice? Many charlatans abound who simply make assertions that aren't evidential. Should we allow them continually bamboozle us? It's now a matter of choice for every individual.

All of humanity's accomplishments, notwithstanding, we're humbled by the universe and we're constantly reminded of our ordinariness in the scheme of things. For instance, let's contemplate the Star of our Solar System. The Sun is truly massive, with a diameter of about 864,000 miles (1,392,000 km), which is 109 times wider than our Earth. To put that into perspective, you could line up 109 Earths across the face of the Sun. Its mass is about 330,000 times that of our planet, making up about 99.86% of the total mass of our Solar System.

Despite its massive size, when compared to other stars, the Sun is actually considered an average-sized star. There are stars that are hundreds of times bigger in diameter than our Sun, and others that are just one-tenth its size. For example, the red giant star, *Betelgeuse*, is about 700 times bigger than the Sun and 14,000 times brighter. The Sun's size and mass are what make it a G-type main-sequence star, also known as a yellow dwarf, although it's worth noting that the Sun's light is actually white, not yellow. Its size and mass are also what determine its surface temperature, which is about 10,000 degrees Fahrenheit (5,500 degrees Celsius), and its core temperature, which is a scorching 27 million degrees Fahrenheit (or 15 million degrees Celsius).

Nothing paints the picture of our gargantuan universe more than the knowledge of the distances it takes to travel within it. Imagine this if you can: the speed of light is roughly 300,000 km per second. That comes to 18,000,000 km/minute or 1.08 billion km/hour; 25.92 billion km/day; which is roughly 9.46 trillion km/annum. Moving at that speed, the light of the Sun takes just 8

minutes, 20 seconds to reach us on Earth. Yet, moving at that same speed, light from the next closest star to us, the *Proxima Centauri*, would take over 4 years to reach us on Earth! And, if we were to build a spacecraft capable of travelling at the speed of light, it would take it – wait for it – 100,000 years to travel through our Galaxy, the Milky Way! Yes, our Milky Way is 100,000 light years across. And that's just one of several billion galaxies in the observable universe!

At this juncture, let's contemplate the poignant words of one of the greatest space scientists that ever lived. On 14 February 1990, NASA spacecraft, Voyager 1, captured an image of the Earth from a distance of about 3.7 billion miles (6 billion kilometers), which showed our planet as a tiny (almost invisible) pale blue dot in the vastness of space! Carl Sagan, the renowned astronomer and science communicator, wrote about that image in his book, *Pale Blue Dot: A Vision of the Human Future in Space* (1994). I will round off this chapter with the following immortal words of his:

> *Look again at that dot. That's here. That's home. That's us. On it, everyone you love, everyone you know, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever was, lived out their lives. The aggregate of our joy and suffering, thousands of confident religions, ideologies, and economic doctrines; every hunter and forager, every king and peasant, every young couple in love, every mother and father, hopeful child, inventor and explorer, every teacher of morals, every corrupt politician, every 'superstar,' every 'supreme leader,' every saint and sinner in the history of our species lived there — on a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam.*
>
> *The Earth is a very small stage in a vast cosmic arena. Think of the endless cruelties visited by the inhabitants of one corner of this pixel on the scarcely distinguishable inhabitants of some other corner, how frequent their misunderstandings, how eager they are to kill one another, how fervent their hatreds. Think of the rivers of blood spilled by all those generals and emperors so that, in glory and triumph, they could become the momentary masters of a fraction of a dot. Our posturings, our imagined self-importance, the delusion that we have some privileged position in the Universe, are challenged by this point of pale light.*
>
> *Our planet is a lonely speck in the great enveloping cosmic dark. In our obscurity, in all this vastness, there is no hint that help will*

come from elsewhere to save us from ourselves. The Earth is the only world known so far to harbor life. There is nowhere else, at least in the near future, to which our species could migrate. Visit, yes. Settle, not yet. Like it or not, for the moment, the Earth is where we make our stand.

It has been said that astronomy is a humbling and character-building experience. There is perhaps no better demonstration of the folly of human conceits than this distant image of our tiny world. To me, it underscores our responsibility to deal more kindly with one another, and to preserve and cherish the pale blue dot, the only home we have.

CHAPTER 18: MY DIRECTORATE SERVICES

"It's cool for me because I'm a director, but I'm also a teacher… and I love working with people who are hungry and have the energy to really do better work." ~ John Singleton

My promotion to the rank of Assistant Director happened before my return from Australia. The good news was relayed to me by my good friend and colleague, Pastor Ajagbe. I was excited to now belong to the Directorate Cadre of the service. It could mean more responsibilities and, hopefully, better opportunities to excel.

On return from Australia, I reported back to the Ministry of Petroleum Resources after submitting my course completion report to the Office of the Head of the Civil Service of the Federation (OHCSF). My stay in the ministry was not without certain benefits, as I had the opportunity of attending ministerial training programmes and other official engagements in Dubai, Doha, Toronto and Singapore. The transformation of Dubai from a virtual desert to a smart, well-sought-after city in less than three decades would make you wonder about what Nigeria was doing with her oil wealth.

Just when I was beginning to enjoy my continued stay in the ministry, my name was included in the general posting for Directorate Cadre officers released by the OHCSF in September 2013. I was to report to the Federal Ministry of Science & Technology (FMST) as the Head of the Anti-Corruption & Transparency Unit (ACTU). It was then it dawned on me why I had earlier been sent on anti-corruption training programmes in Minna and Lagos between 2012 and 2013. No problem. As a pool officer, my orientation had prepared me to serve anywhere in the service. But I was taken aback by the welcome I received from the Permanent Secretary of FMST.

"Did you offend somebody powerful?" queried the Perm Sec on seeing my posting letter.

"Not to my knowledge, ma" I responded. "Why did you ask?"

"From Planning, Monitoring & Evaluation Division of the Ministry of Petroleum Resources to ACTU here? This posting certainly looks like a punitive one. Are you sure you want to take it?"

"I doubt if it's a question of my choice. We're not supposed to reject any posting. So, I'm here to resume at ACTU."

"In that case, you'll have to give us some time to set up an ACTU Unit in the Ministry. Tell the DHR to see me."

"Okay, ma'am."

I could hardly sleep that night. Punitive posting? Am I not in soup? Why was I even posted to a non-existing unit? Heading a new unit would certainly come with its own challenges, but I made up my mind that I was going to give it my best shot. After all, it might just provide the right opportunity for me to contribute my quota to the country's anti-corruption initiatives. I proceeded on my 2013 annual leave to allow them more time to sort things out.

On my assumption of duty from leave, I was surprised to be told that the Perm Sec had approved that I be redeployed within FMST as AD (Appointment), as that was where vacancy existed, and that the OHCSF had been notified accordingly. From ACTU to appointment, I was back in core-admin. Not bad.

My experiences in FMST grounded me in core-admin duties. I had the opportunity of sitting on (and, in a few cases, chairing, on behalf of the Perm Sec) the Senior Staff Committee meetings of several of the Ministry's agencies. I was later appointed as the Ministry's representative on the Pension Board of Trustees of the National Agency for Research in Chemical Technology (NARICT), Zaria. These were roles that exposed me to top management responsibilities which positively impacted my development. By 2014, when I was promoted as Deputy Director (Admin), I felt truly ready to head a division.

Back to Head of Service

In November 2015, I was summoned, via a phone call, to the OHCSF to see the Perm Sec, Common Services Office (CSO), Mr Yemi Adelakun - a man I had never met nor even heard of before then. It was about 7pm. I was already back home after closing for the day. What could the Perm Sec (CSO) want from me? I kept wondering as I navigated my way back to the OHCSF. On arrival, I was ushered in by his secretary into the expansive office of the man who was the Accounting Officer of the OHCSF. The man – intelligent-looking, handsome and well-dressed, with an aura of power all around him - went straight to the point.

"I am a very busy man. I'd been looking for a competent Assistant or Deputy Director to work as my SA. Someone who knows you well, and whose

judgement I trust, has recommended you very highly. That's why I called you. Could you tell me more about your qualifications and experience?"

I did a self-introduction and offered him an updated version of my resume. Mr Adelakun looked pleased.

"In this office, you're going to be quite busy, but I can assure you that you would not regret it. So, would you be willing to be my SA?"

"It would be my pleasure, Sir. In fact, I'd been expecting my DD's posting for quite a while." I accepted his offer, rather anxiously.

"Great. The posting will be out tomorrow. When can you resume?"

That was how a Perm Sec I'd never known before appointed me as his Special Assistant. It was quite a challenging but worthwhile experience. Challenging because there was no fixed closing time on the job. As SA to the big boss, you do not leave your boss in the office. I experienced it from Day one: we closed at 11pm, which happened to be about the average closing time in that office. My job description entailed accompanying my boss to almost everywhere, including all his official meetings. I soon got used to it. The good side to that was that I also accompanied him on his official overseas trips. Little wonder that one of his earliest instructions to me was: "Don't rely on only your green passport. You must process and get an official government passport. Sometimes, you won't have time to wait for visa."

Mr Adelakun was a man of action. He was the brain behind the Federal Integrated Staff Housing (FISH) programme, designed to help civil servants own their own houses at lower than average cost. We held several meetings with officials from both houses of the National Assembly, hosted a National Home Ownership Conference and got several private developers and other stakeholders interested in the scheme. The programme was eventually launched with fanfare at Apo-Tafyi and Lokogoma in October 2016.

Besides, when it was discovered that too many civil servants were dying prematurely due to avoidable cardiovascular-related diseases (more about this in Chapter nineteen), we tackled the problem headlong. The Head of Service, Mrs Oyo-Ita, approved the establishment of a well-equipped gym, another Adelakun-initiative. The gym embarked on a keep-fit campaign, gave free access to all civil servants and even employed the services of a professional trainer. Sadly, we were literally begging people to come and use the facilities. It beats me, even until this day: Why is it that the average civil servant cannot be bothered about keeping fit for good health? Does the maxim, "health is wealth" mean nothing to them?

A Flurry of Postings

The 18 months I had to spend with my boss went past in a jiffy. He had to proceed on statutory retirement in May 2017. Prior to his retirement, he arranged that I be posted to the Employee Relations and Welfare Department as the Deputy Director (Benefits Administration), the Division in charge of the processing of Group Life Insurance claims received from relatives of civil servants who died while still in service. For reasons best known to the Head of Service, I - together with other senior officers who worked closely with Adelakun - was redeployed in less than three months after my resumption. I was posted to the Federal Ministry of Water Resources as DD (Planning).

Barely a month later, I was on the move again: a posting referred to as "corrective posting" was released by the OHCSF. I was to now report to the Ministry of Niger Delta Affairs as DD (Planning & Policy). I was upset. Why post me again so soon? In a bid to find out what the problem was, I headed to the Career Management Office in the OHCSF, but was told that the latest posting superseded the earlier one.

Having been trained never to refuse an authorised posting, I packed my things even before I had time to properly settle in at Water Resources, and headed to Niger Delta Ministry in September 2017. I was warmly received by a hardworking and amiable Director, Alhassan Yakmut, who had served as the last Director-General of the National Sports Commission before it was scrapped by President Buhari in 2015.

The Ministry of Niger Delta Affairs had its peculiar challenges. We were constantly bombarded with demands from, sometimes even harassed by, Niger Delta militants. They had come to see the ministry as their own, since it was established as one of the peace initiatives aimed at pacifying them. For them, the Niger Delta Infrastructure Master Plan was being implemented only on paper. They demanded more action. Prompted by the militants, the Honourable Minister set up an Inter-Ministerial Committee for the Implementation of Niger-Delta Master Plan. My Director served as the Secretary of the Committee, while I was the Deputy Secretary.

The Committee broke into subcommittees and set to work. We reached out and got the support of United Nations Human Habitat and other stakeholders. Action was on its way towards ameliorating the suffering of Niger-Deltans and improving their living conditions. Moreover, we commenced a flurry of activities for the organisation of the third National Council on Niger Delta, which would bring all stakeholders together and

develop strategies to actualise the Master Plan. Then boom! Another posting was released by the OHCSF. Again, my name was on it. This time, I was to report to the Federal Ministry of Youth and Sports as DD (Special Duties). I had spent only six months in my current post; and just when I was beginning to enjoy my position, I was posted yet again!

It was on my resumption in the Ministry of Youth & Sports that I realised that it was the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry, Mr Olusade Adesola, who had submitted my name for posting to his office. We had worked together briefly on the Secretariat of the Service-wide Meeting of Permanent Secretaries in the OHCSF. He had just been appointed as Perm Sec and was trying to set up his team. He explained that he knew my capacity and wanted me to head the Division in charge of the Ministry's zonal intervention projects. No problem, Sir. What else could I say?

Again, I was busy. As there was no substantive Director in that Department, I occupied that position and office. The Reform Coordination, ACTU, and the Stock Verification Units were domiciled in my department. I was to conduct oversight on constituency and zonal intervention projects; chair the Committee for the Re-organisation of the Ministry's Zonal Offices, and also take charge of the Top Management Meetings. I was kept even busier when the Perm Sec approved that the Public-Private-Partnership Unit, following the exit of its head, should report to me. Luckily, I had very capable officers in the persons of Taiwo Adekoya and Blessing Ugwuzor. They lightened my burden.

A Dose of Failure

Meanwhile, the Federal Civil Service Commission (FCSC) organised its 2018 promotion exams for directorate level officers. I participated for I was due for the position of Director. For some inexplicable reason, the results were unduly delayed as it took almost a year for the release of names of candidates shortlisted for the oral interview. During the waiting period, I was approached by the Chief Executive Officer of Poise Resource Centre with a most unusual proposition.

"Look, Mr Aina, you've got to give this promotion exercise whatever it takes to make it. I hope you're aware that vacancies are limited."

"Of course, I know that. I've put in my best during the written exams." I retorted.

"I know the people there at the FCSC. They always take money. If you can raise about ₦3million to give them, you'll be sure to get one of the limited slots. If you go through me, they might even reduce it to ₦2.5 or even ₦2million."

Look, Mr Golo, I'm not interested in your cash-for-promotion offer. If I can't get it on merit, I'd rather retire as a DD." I felt so nauseated by his proposition that I asked him to leave my office.

After his departure, I started wondering about the sorry state of the civil service. Here was an open proposition asking me to bribe my way into getting promoted. What was the service becoming? Now, we hear of people even getting the so-called "juicy" postings through bribery, and sometimes having to retain such positions by continually oiling the same corrupt system that put them there in the first place. It's a sorry situation. I had no idea if Golo was actually facilitating some people's promotion or it was just a scam, and I couldn't be bothered. I had zero interest in such a scheme. I had always been a dedicated and hardworking civil servant with a penchant for putting in my best in whatever position I was. That wasn't going to change. For me, it had to be promotion on merit or nothing.

I was among those shortlisted for the final stage of the promotion exercise: the oral interview. The questions asked were embarrassingly simple: Give five sources of information and five means of official communication in the civil service. I do not want to believe any DD in service could fail to clinch such questions. I had been teaching that kind of stuff to career officers and other junior ones since my days in the Ministry of Petroleum Resources. Perhaps the interviewers were looking for some other things. After the interview, I went home feeling confident, only to receive a big blow when the final list of promoted candidates was released.

The news was broken to me by my friend, Mubo, who came to my house in tears after having seen the results released in the night. He was weeping for me. It was an irony of circumstance that I, who missed the promotion, was the one now consoling him, who got the promotion.

"Wipe your tears, Mubo. It's not the end of life. I'll give it another shot next year."

My consoling words, notwithstanding, my failure to clinch the 2018 promotion seemed to shortchange Mubo's joy, as he refused to celebrate his own promotion. He even insisted that our Residents Association in the Estate should postpone the usual celebrations till the following year, in order that I might not be left out of it. What a friend and what a sacrifice! Thankfully, his

words turned out to be prophetic. I was among those felicitated by the Estate the following year, having earned the promotion that eluded me in 2018.

In the Cabinet Secretariat

In late 2019, I was opportune to be among those selected to represent Nigeria (as an official) at the 2019 Africa Games held in Morocco. Nigerian athletes and officials were airlifted to Rabat via an Air Peace chartered flight, and returned to Nigeria three weeks later. On return, preparations commenced for Nigeria's participation at the 2020 Olympic Games tagged "Japan 2020". But it was not to be, as the games were eventually postponed indefinitely due to the outbreak of COVID-!9 (an airborne respiratory virus) which first broke out in China, but soon spread worldwide. Global efforts aimed at controlling the spread of that virus led to a lockdown of virtually all crowd-pulling activities, both locally and internationally, throughout 2020 and even beyond.

In Nigeria, the lockdown commenced in late February 2020 and lasted till July. It invariably affected the much-anticipated posting of those of us newly promoted to various positions. The posting was released two weeks later. I was to report to the Office of the Secretary to the Government of the Federation (OSGF) as the Director (Governance & Security) in the Cabinet Affairs Office. I now had the responsibility of heading one of the three departments that serve as the secretariat of the Federal Executive Council, the National Council of State, and the Nigeria Police Council, all of which are chaired by the President and Commander-in-Chief, Federal Republic of Nigeria.

I reported on 7 September 2020, and was received by the Perm Sec (Cabinet Affairs Office), Mr Babatunde Lawal, a workaholic, known for working from 10am till 2 or 3am the following morning regularly daily, inclusive of Saturdays! He warmed up to me easily, and dragged me to a meeting with the Secretary to the Government of the Federation (SGF), Boss Mustapha, on the same day I resumed. But for me, his working hours were obscene. Whoever worked regularly like that was asking for trouble. I kept wondering whether my boss had a death wish. I could imagine that his system would be constantly flooded with cortisol and other stress hormones, which could, on the long run, be damaging to his health. I tried to warn him, but he just wouldn't listen.

On my own, I had to devise a way of simplifying the workload. I adopted 8pm as my regular closing time, except whenever the work

warranted staying later than that, which had to be occasional. Meanwhile, I couldn't run away from joining the Editorial Team work on Saturdays, and going to the office on Sundays, to proofread the Federal Executive Council documents that would be circulated the following day. I tried to reduce our workload by making the Council documents, especially the Conclusions, more succinct, but my efforts were resisted. "That's how we've been doing this work. You can't just come now and change everything" was all I was told. What to do? I tagged along, at least initially. Then it happened.

Barely a month after my assumption of duty in Cabinet Secretariat, the Perm Sec slumped in the office and was rushed to hospital. The prognosis wasn't good; several of his organs had been compromised. We lost him two months later, unfortunately. We attended his funeral and had to return to the office immediately after the interment, to prepare for the following week's Council meeting. Our most senior Director, Mrs Anwuna, was approved to occupy the position of the late Perm Sec in acting capacity. The Federal Executive Council observed a minute silence for the late Deputy Secretary of Council, and the following year, he was given the National Productivity Award posthumously.

I made up my mind that I would not appreciate a posthumous award. It would be better to be appreciated while still alive. I was able to convince Mr James Sule, the next Perm Sec who resumed in January 2021, that we needed to work smarter, not longer. I needed at least a day off-work weekly. He agreed. We set things in motion. Most Saturdays became work-free for me, but my Sunday proofreading services were not negotiable. Fair enough. Subsequently, all my bosses, the Perm Sec, the SGF, and even the President acknowledged my contributions and the awards came while I lived.

In 2022, nominated by the Perm Sec, I became a recipient of the Presidential Award for Public Service Excellence, which was accompanied by a cash gift of half-a-million Naira, donated by the AIG Imokhuede Foundation. It didn't end there. In 2023, nominated by the SGF, Boss Mustapha, I became a Member of the Order of the Federal Republic (MFR), having received a National Honours Award of that Order, and a certificate personally signed by the President of the Federal Republic, Muhammadu Buhari. Those awards served as befitting recognition for my contributions to the service of the nation. I felt really proud that my country deemed it fit to honour me, even before my retirement from the service.

So, my dear compatriots, whenever you're tempted to believe that you're indispensable; that the responsibility to keep the world going rests on

your shoulders, slow down a bit. It is a matter of absolute necessity that you find time for relaxation and take care of your health. (I will return to this subject in the next chapter.) Remember: nature abhors a vacuum. No one is indispensable. Should the need arise, someone else will take that your revered position, and the work will continue without you. The world moves on despite your absence. Does anyone imagine it could be otherwise?

CHAPTER 19: A FORTUNE CALLED HEALTH

"To keep the body in good health is a duty, otherwise we shall not be able to keep our mind strong and clear." ~ Gautama Buddha

A Stupendous Miracle!

It has been said and repeated countless times that "health is wealth." For many of us, we hear this mantra quite regularly, perhaps too regularly, such that it no longer has the impact it ought to have. As the proverbial saying goes: it enters our ears through the right orifice and leaves through the left.

We, married men, tend to underestimate the vital role that good home-made food plays in helping us maintain buoyant health. Those of us lucky enough to have wives who pay attention to putting wholesome meals on our dining tables, take these things for granted. What you take into your belly – and by extension, your health – ought to be in good, health-conscious hands. In that regard, I give a high five to my Awesome One, Helen! We all need to show more appreciation for the services of the women (or any other) in our lives who, for the most part, take charge of kitchen affairs. This fact didn't quite become obvious to me until I went to Australia. I left my family behind in Nigeria, which directly impacted my health. How so?

While in Nigeria, eating out was an experience I rarely had; in Australia, it became the norm. I had become extremely lazy at cooking. Eating out presented an easier, even cheaper, option. Burgers and chips came handy, especially on campus. No stress, right? Wrong! Dead wrong. The stress I was trying to avoid was simply transferred gradually into my body, into my blood vessels. My weight ballooned from 82 kg to 96.5. In no time, the results showed: high cholesterol, high blood sugar, and high blood pressure (BP) had become my portion. My BP reading consistently remained in the region of 170/100! I was placed on medication to remedy the situation – a situation I hadn't bargained for (but hadn't I?).

On return to Nigeria, I had to change my BP medication twice. Another medication was added to help manage my cholesterol that was going wacky. Despite all that, keeping my BP in check remained a constant struggle. Besides, my blood sugar level kept threatening to hit the roof. I expressed my concern to my doctor, who said:
"At 96 kg, your body mass index (BMI) shows you're in the obese region. You need to do something about it."
"What should be the ideal weight for my height?"

"Not more than 77kg," replied the doctor after consulting his BMI calculator.
"Ok then. I'm going down to 76." I didn't know where that determination came from.
"That would be nice. It would help the efficacy of your medication. Make the weight shedding a gradual process though – don't rush it."
"Ok. Thank you, doc."

That conversation with the doctor took place in late 2014. I had to shed 20kg. Would that really be nice? I had been enjoying quite some admiration from friends and colleagues. Many would say something like: "You're developing a protruding belly; it's a sign of good living… madam is doing a great job." Now that I'd come to the realisation that all that excess weight, as well as protruding belly, was detrimental to my health, I started wondering: Were those paying me compliments for my looks mocking me? Or, were they genuinely ignorant of the fact that it's a sign of bad living, not a good one?

Over the following three years, I worked at dropping my excess baggage. It wasn't easy, but I did it. I went online and gathered as much information as I could on healthy living; joined a health club; downloaded and started using a Health App; and, most importantly, I doubled up on regular exercising by making it a daily affair. In addition, I reduced my food portion, cut back drastically on salt, stopped all frizzy drinks, and generally watched whatever went into my mouth. Over time, I found I could do up to 10km walk without feeling exhausted.

I watched with excitement as my weight gradually dipped. By the time I was down to about 80kg, the miraculous happened: my BP came crashing, and my blood cholesterol and sugar normalised! Encouraged by my doctor and my brother, Kunle, I kept at my health regimen, with stupendous results. The doctor started reducing the number and dosage of my BP medication until I was eventually weaned from them, without any detrimental effect. It's quite amazing what regular exercise and proper diet can do for one's health. How many people out there were in need of some form of encouragement to do this? I needed to spread the word around. I started giving regular health talks to whomever cared to listen, including all my colleagues and office staff.

Don't Be Caught Unawares

Sometime in 2021, I was asked to give a health talk to fellow members of an Alumni Association. I started by asking for a raise of hand from those who had checked their blood sugar, BP and cholesterol within the past year. In an

audience of about 60, only two hands went up (less than 4%)! It's even more amazing when you take into consideration the fact that the gathering was composed of mainly middle-aged people. When I prodded to know why the others weren't checking, the response I got was, "*Na person wey chop belle ful dey do medical check-up*" (rough meaning: medical check-up is for the rich).

In this part of the world, people rarely do any form of medical check-up. Little wonder that so many people keep dropping dead. Too many people, especially middle-agers, are walking corpses simply because they do not bother to know their numbers. How can you be in your 40s or 50s and not know your BP or blood sugar readings? Do you not know that it is possible to look absolutely healthy even when those numbers have gone awry? Unfortunately, we live in an environment that is so superstition-ridden that when someone drops dead, our people call it "a spiritual attack". Do people not realise that even the most basic checking of such vitals may save their lives?

Let me share with you an experience I had as the Deputy Director, Benefits Administration Division in the Welfare and Employee Relations Department of the OHCSF. The Division's primary responsibility was to process life insurance claims for the beneficiaries or successors of those who died in active service. Nigeria's pension law mandates the federal government to provide group life insurance for all public servants, at such a level as would allow the successors of those who die before their retirement claim an insurance compensation of up to 300% of the annual gross emoluments of such deceased public servants. Once submitted to the Head of Service, all requests for the payment of such insurance claims would, invariably, land on my desk. The sheer number of applications for the life insurance claims received daily was quite alarming. The pertinent question was: Why were so many public servants dropping dead while still in service?

Naturally, the applications were accompanied by supporting documents, among which was the medical certificate of cause of death. This attracted my attention. Most of the deceased were middle-aged men and women. Why were so many succumbing to the cold hands of death in their 40s and 50s? We tabulated the various causes of death; and, in no time, a pattern was noticed: 67% (two thirds) of the deaths were caused by non-communicable diseases (NCDs), over 85% of which were cardio-vascular related issues. Clearly, NCDs were claiming too many lives among public servants. But why?

Globally, NCDs have become a major concern, and Nigeria is not immune to this trend. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), NCDs killed over 43 million people in 2021, accounting for 75% of all non-pandemic related deaths worldwide. The NCD Alliance notes that NCDs are the world's number one killer, affecting both rich and poor nations alike. In fact, WHO projects that the global NCD burden will increase by 17% in the next decade, with African region experiencing a 27% increase. Cardiovascular diseases (CVDs) account for a significant percentage of the NCDs. Yet, most CVDs are preventable. Why aren't we doing enough to prevent them?

Preventing Cardiovascular Diseases

13 million CVD-related deaths occur annually (WHO). You don't have to be part of that grim statistics. The good news is that CVDs, such as heart diseases and stroke, are largely preventable through targeted strategies that address modifiable risk factors. If you're a middle-ager, or younger, you may want to pay attention to the following CVD prevention guide:

1. Lifestyle Changes
   - Heart-Healthy Diet:
     - Prioritise fruits, vegetables, whole grains, legumes, nuts, and fatty fish (rich in omega-3s).
     - Limit saturated fats (e.g. red meat, butter), trans-fats (processed snacks), sodium (salt), and added sugars.
     - Adopt dietary approaches to stop hypertension (DASH), proven to lower CVD risk.

   - Regular Physical Activity:
     - Aim for 150 minutes (or more) per week of moderate exercise (e.g. brisk walking, cycling) to improve blood pressure, cholesterol, and manage weight. This is easily achievable by doing 30 minutes of moderate intensity activities daily, at least five times weekly. This is the recommended minimum to maintain good heart health (cardiovascular fitness). Feel free to do more, if you have the capacity.
     - Include strength training two times a week.

   - Avoid Tobacco:
     - Smoking damages blood vessels and accelerates atherosclerosis. Quitting reduces CVD risk by 50% within one year.

- Avoid secondhand smoke as much as possible.

- Limit Alcohol:
  - Excessive drinking raises blood pressure and arrhythmia risk. Consume alcoholic beverages moderately.

- Manage Stress:
  - Chronic stress increases inflammation and blood pressure. Use mindfulness, meditation, or hobbies to cope.

2. Control Key Risk Factors
   - Blood Pressure (BP): Know your family history; and, if at risk, check your BP regularly, and ensure it is kept within normal range (even if with medication).
   - Cholesterol: Check cholesterol level at least once yearly, and strive to keep it within normal range.
   - Blood Sugar: Check blood sugar level, at least twice yearly, to ensure it is kept within healthy range.
   - Weight: Maintain a healthy weight and waist circumference (preferably staying within the "normal" category of MBI). Obesity is a risk factor for many diseases.

3. Manage Existing Conditions
   - Medication Adherence: If you need to, take prescribed antihypertensives, statins, or anticoagulants, as directed by your physician.
   - Rehabilitation: Cardiac rehabilitation programmes improve recovery post-heart attack and reduce recurrence.

By combining individual efforts (diet, exercise) with systemic policies (salt reduction, tobacco control), most CVDs can be avoided or delayed significantly.

BE PHYSICALLY ACTIVE: It's the Best Medicine

Engaging in regular physical exercise offers a multitude of benefits across various aspects of health and wellbeing. Let me list some of these benefits.

A. Physical Health Benefits

1. Weight Management: Helps burn calories, maintain a healthy weight, and prevent obesity.
2. Cardiovascular Health: Strengthens the heart, improves circulation, lowers blood pressure, and reduces risks of heart disease and stroke.
3. Muscle and Bone Strength: Enhances muscle mass, bone density (reducing osteoporosis risk), and joint flexibility through strength training and weight-bearing exercises.
4. Improved Immunity: Moderate exercise boosts immune function, lowering susceptibility to infections.
5. Energy Boost: Enhances endurance and efficiency of cardiovascular and muscular systems, increasing overall energy levels.
6. Chronic Disease Prevention: Reduces risks of type 2 diabetes, metabolic syndrome, and certain cancers (e.g. colon, breast).
7. Longevity: Correlates with a longer lifespan due to compounded health benefits.

B. Mental and Emotional Benefits

8. Mood Enhancement: Releases endorphins, reducing symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress.
9. Cognitive Function: Improves memory, focus, and learning; lowers dementia risk and supports brain health.
10. Sleep Quality: Promotes deeper, more restorative sleep by regulating circadian rhythms.
11. Self-Esteem and Body Image: Fosters confidence through physical improvements and goal achievement.

C. Functional and Lifestyle Benefits

12. Balance and Flexibility: Reduces fall risks in older adults through activities like stamina building and balancing.
13. Pain Management: Alleviates chronic pain (e.g. arthritis) by improving joint function and strength.
14. Social Interaction: Group activities (sports, classes) encourage social connections and combat loneliness.
15. Productivity: Enhances focus and efficiency in daily tasks and workplace performance.

D. Specialised Benefits

16. Addiction Recovery: Aids in managing cravings and supporting sobriety through routine and dopamine regulation.
17. Women's Health: Eases menstrual discomfort and PMS symptoms.

18. Skin Health: Increases blood flow, promoting healthier skin cell turnover.

E. Economic and Environmental Impact

19. Healthcare Cost Reduction: Lowers medical expenses by preventing chronic illnesses.

20. Eco-Friendly Choices: Active transportation (walking, cycling) reduces carbon footprint.

Regular physical activity is a holistic practice that enhances quality of life across physical, mental, and social dimensions. Nonetheless, always remember that:

- Every activity matters: You can start small, and build strength and endurance over time.
- Moderation is key: Over-exercising can strain the body.
- Variety is important: Combining aerobic, strength, and flexibility exercises maximises benefits.
- It is advisable to consult a healthcare provider before starting a new regimen, especially if you have pre-existing health conditions.

Water for Life

Many years ago, I read the book, *You Are Not Sick, You Are Thirsty – Water: For Health, For Healing, For Life*, by Fereydoon Batmanghelidj, M.D. This is a thought-provoking book that highlights the importance of hydration in the maintenance of good health, and lays some emphasis on how water can be used to manage pain. Although some of Dr Batmanghelidj's ideas have been criticised for oversimplification, others have been supported by scientific research, including the following facts: dehydration can exacerbate symptoms of diseases and hypertension, and drinking adequate amount of water is often helpful in the sustenance of good health. The health practice advocated in that book is what has become known as water therapy.

Water therapy, also known as hydrotherapy or aqua therapy, is a practice that involves drinking plenty of water to promote physical and mental wellbeing. Here are the advantages associated with the therapy:

- Hydration: Drinking plenty of water helps maintain proper hydration levels, which is essential for bodily functions, such as regulating body temperature, transporting nutrients, and removing waste products.

- Detoxification: Water helps flush out toxins and waste products from the body, which can improve skin health, reduce the risk of diseases, and boost energy levels.
- Digestive health: Water can help prevent constipation, reduce symptoms of irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), and support healthy gut bacteria.
- Weight loss: Drinking water can aid in weight loss by increasing satiety, reducing appetite, and improving metabolism.
- Exercise performance: Proper hydration is essential for exercise performance and recovery. Water helps regulate body temperature, transport nutrients and oxygen to cells, and remove waste products.
- Mental clarity and focus: Dehydration can impair cognitive function, memory, and mood. Drinking enough water can help improve mental clarity, focus, and overall mental wellbeing.
- Skin Health: Proper hydration can improve skin elasticity and reduce dryness.
- Kidney Function: Good hydration dilutes urine, potentially lowering the risk of kidney stones and urinary tract infections (UTIs). Water aids kidneys and liver in filtering waste.

For optimum results, practitioners of water therapy generally recommend certain times for water intake thus:

- ✓ Upon Waking: Rehydrate after sleep to kick-start metabolism and aid bowel movement.
- ✓ Before Meals (20–30 minutes prior): This may aid digestion and prevent overeating.
- ✓ Mid-Morning and Mid-Afternoon: Maintain adequate hydration between meals and throughout the day.
- ✓ Before, During and After Exercise: Replace fluids lost through sweat.
- ✓ When Thirsty: Listen to your body's natural signals and take water as required, especially in hot weather conditions.
- ✓ Before Bed (Small Sips): Avoid large amounts to prevent sleep disruption.

So, there you have it, guys. Keep yourself well-hydrated to boost your health. It is usually recommended that a healthy adult should take about 8-10 glasses (roughly about 2.5-3 litres) of water daily. You may not need that much if you take other beverages, and you may need more if you exercise a lot or are out in hot weather. If your urine is dark yellow or you're not urinating frequently enough, it may be a sign that you're not drinking enough water.

Nonetheless, it is worthy of note that it is also possible (though rare) to overhydrate. This condition is called *hyponatremia* or water intoxication, which can cause symptoms such as headaches, nausea, vomiting, and in severe cases, seizures and coma. You can avoid this by monitoring your urine output. If your urine is like water (i.e colourless), rather than pale yellow, it may be an indication of over-hydration. Whatever your situation, never forget that water therapy is not a replacement for medical treatment. If you have any underlying health conditions or concerns, consult with a healthcare professional before starting any new therapy or treatment.

CHAPTER 20: 35 YEARS IS UP!

"Retirement is a time to do what you want to do, when you want to do it, where you want to do it, and how you want to do it." ~ Catherine Pulsifer

All Grown Now

"How time flies!" I've heard this countless number of times. Most times, it doesn't have any meaning until you're caught up in the so-called flight of time. I remember how, as a teenager, we used to envy the older ones who didn't have to wear school uniforms or live by school rules; how we couldn't wait to finish secondary school and move on to the university; how we couldn't wait to start dating, or graduate or start work after schooling and so forth. Those times we couldn't wait for eventually caught up with us, and we simply set eyes on the next when-I-grow-up target. Then one day, you get there. Now, you're all grown. Then what?

Memories came flying back. I remember being regarded as being too young to start schooling, and how I had cried my eyes out, refusing to be comforted. I recall how some parents, even my students, considered me too young to be a youth corps member. I recollect how, shortly after starting work, I had been told by a visiting office medical team that I was too young to queue up with those that wanted to check their BP. Then, time flew, and I was asking my Facebook friends whether, as a 50-year old, I had become old enough to be considered a senior citizen, and promptly got the reply, "wait another ten years." Now, almost suddenly, while working on the FISH programme in the OHCSF, I was considered too old to apply for a housing loan. From being "too young" to being "too old", Tunde, you're all grown now! "Grown or old?" (in the voice of Teni). Na you sabi o!

Talking about being all grown brings back memories of how Mum used to admonish my wife and me when Tide was a new born.

"Always remember that the baby cannot turn on her own. So, you must turn her around regularly, to avoid bedsores from laying exclusively on the same side of the body."

Now, that lovely baby who couldn't turn herself on bed is all grown. So grown that she had successfully navigated her path through school and was due to be inducted into the Physiotherapy profession – a ceremony scheduled to hold at the Oduduwa hall of the Obafemi Awolowo University. Induction date: Wednesday, 8 March 2022. My wife was ecstatic, saying: "So, my baby who couldn't turn is now a graduate!"

The University was in session. Both Tide and Teni had gone ahead of us. Helen and I flew from Abuja to Akure and had an airport cab take us to Ife a day before the ceremony. Everything went as well as they possibly could. Pat and Lola were on hand to add colour to the occasion. It was grand. We had a little reception afterwards at the new Bukateria Complex. The rest of the party headed to Lagos the following day, while I returned to Abuja for urgent Cabinet Office duties. Tide later proceeded to do both her internship and national youth service in Abuja.

Time didn't stop flying. By December 2024, the graduation train caught up with Teni, having completed her B.Arch. programme in the same university as her sister. I couldn't make Teni's graduation, but my better-half was there live. Pat had to put her vehicle on the road all the way from Lagos to Ife. Helen flew to Lagos to join her sister in making necessary preparations. They ensured that our Sweetheart had a fun-filled time during her graduation ceremony. Teni later proceeded to commence her Master's programme in the same course: Architecture, having realised that they could postpone enrolment for youth service till after completing the Masters. Thus, both of my girls are all grown now, and looking forward to the promising times that lay ahead of them, notwithstanding the challenging environment that Nigeria presents.

Retyring to Retire

As I approached the main gate of the National Defence College, my phone rang. I was connected automatically via the car's blue tooth.

"Good morning, Mr Aina. Just calling to know where you are now."
"I'm at your gate."
"Ok, I'll join the welcome party waiting to receive you."

That was Rear Admiral Adams Muye, the man who had invited me to deliver a paper titled, "Project Monitoring and Evaluation: Experience from MDAs" to participants of Course 33 at the National Defence College, Abuja. I had prepared my paper with all the meticulousness I could muster. This was a big one. I must not flunk it.

I was given a VIP treatment. The presentation went well, so well that quite a number of the course participants congratulated me for a job well done, and requested for my phone contact. Thereafter, I signed the Facilitators' Register, snapped pictures with the top Management Team of the College, and managed to grab a cup of tea before rushing to the Presidential

Villa for a Federal Executive Council meeting scheduled to commence at noon.

After the FEC meeting, I discussed my experience at the Defence College Course 33 presentation with my Permanent Secretary, Mr Pheelangwa, and presented him with my plaque, which he admired.

"You're lucky to have such a break. It's a nice experience for you. How did you get invited as a facilitator?"

"It was on recommendation. I'd been presenting course papers at different training programmes since I was an Assistant Director in the Ministry of Petroleum Resources. I've even had to travel out of Abuja to places like Minna, Keffi and Jos to make presentations."

"Really, that's a nice one. It means that you have your post-retirement vocation already cut out for you. It would keep you busy while making some money on the side. Keep it up."

"Thank you, Sir. I will."

My Perm Sec was right. I was only a few months from retirement, and becoming a training consultant or facilitator rang like a great idea. I could re-tyre my path along that new trajectory. After all, I had honed my skills in course facilitation engagements since my days in the Ministry of Science and Technology. The Ministry was mandated to supervise eighteen agencies; and, invariably, some of us in the Human Resource Management Department got drawn into their training programmes. I was one of the lucky ones, as I later became sought-after in delivering one paper or other. Such engagements soon became my side hustle. I was now seeing the possibility of turning it into my main hustle after retiring from the service. That would be quite some re-tyring!

Moreover, it has been said that one of the unhealthiest practices to indulge in after an active service life is to retire into a life of solitude and inactivity. It's detrimental to the physical and mental health of the retiree. Nature abhors a vacuum; and, in the absence of adequate mental stimulation, the brain could easily start shrinking. I wasn't about to let that be my lot. Therefore, the quest for good health makes it essential to keep moving, both physically and mentally.

Additional Responsibilities

By early 2022, following the retirement of my two fellow Directors in the Cabinet Affairs Office, I became the most senior Director in the Office. The implication was that I was saddled with the responsibility of covering the duties

of the Permanent Secretary in his absence. I fulfilled those responsibilities twice during the days of Mr James Sule. It brought me into direct contact with the Secretary to the Government of the Federation, Boss Mustapha. More than anything else, I got to know Mr Boss as truly a great boss who appreciated exemplary work, and we developed very good working rapport. Coincidentally, his wife had been my colleague in the Ministry of Petroleum Resources.

The transition period from the Muhammadu Buhari to the Bola Ahmed Tinubu Administration was an extremely stressful one for us in the Cabinet Office: we had to grapple with more than the usual number of meetings of the Federal Executive Council. In addition, meetings of the Council of State and the Police Council were held to consider issues relating to the national elections, change of currency, security and other matters. Consequently, there was no moment of respite for any of the key officers in the Cabinet Secretariat: we worked back to back, inclusive of Saturdays and Sundays. There were few occasions when some of us had to work through the night, and still had to be at another meeting the following morning.

I guess it was in appreciation of that great commitment and sacrifice that James Sule was given a national honours award of the Officer of the Order of the Niger (OON), and I received the national award of the Member of the Order of the Federal Republic (MFR). The awards were duly gazetted. The certificate, which serves as the Instrument of Conferment of National Honour, was personally signed by the President and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Muhammadu Buhari. The conferment came exactly one year to my retirement. What more could a civil servant ask for? I was one of the lucky ones whose contribution to national development did not go unnoticed.

A Surprising Farewell

A number of my friends had cause to ask me if I intended to throw a party for my retirement. My response was always the same: "You know me; I'm not a party person." The preparation I faced had to do only with the verification of prospective retirees required by our respective Pension Fund Administrators. It was good that I started early as the process was more tedious that I had envisaged. By March 2024, I was done with all the pre-retirement applications, registration and verification required. I even succeeded in getting my repatriation allowance before the due date.

12 May 2024 fell on a Sunday, which meant that my last day in office had to be Friday, 10 May. As I drove into my official parking lot in the premises of the OSGF, I felt reminiscent: so, it's been 35 long years since I joined the service. I felt grateful for my contribution, for the people I had worked with, and for the lives I had been opportune to touch.

I was still deep in those thoughts as I approached the offices of the CAO. Shouts of "Congratulations, Sir!" rented the air, as I was surrounded by officers and staff who ushered me into what I hardly recognised as my office. Decorations, cards, flowers and balloons were everywhere, with the most prominent being a banner portraying my picture and a congratulatory message on my retirement. A massive congratulatory card, already signed by most of the officers and staff of Cabinet, was displayed on my desk. I was moved to tears on learning that my officers and staff raised money to put all of that together, despite my insistence on not having a party. Some of my former officers and staff like Patrick, Taiwo, Blessing and Mary were part of that conspiracy. It was indeed a surprise, an overwhelming one at that!

The Perm Sec arrived, accompanied by some of my colleagues, including Maryrose (the Director, Economic & Finance), Tony (the Director, HRM), Mgbenu (the Director General Services), and Aremu (the DD, Governance & Security); and a semi-formal programme started. If I had any inkling that anything near this was being planned, I would have invited my wife to come along with me. Speeches and testimonials given on my contributions to the service and lives of people around me, only served to bring tears to my eyes.

Feeling overwhelmed by such unexpected outpouring of love and well wishes, I thanked everyone for their kind words. I assured them that we would remain life-long contacts and friends. Some of my other colleagues and friends showed up only for the evening session that was more interactive and less formal, with plenty to eat and drink.

The final drawing down of the curtain on my service life was done on Sunday, 12 May 2024. This I did with my darling wife, Helen. We simply went to my office together to take all my personal effects, pictures and other memorabilia, after which we had lunch together at *The Place*. And thus, the curtain fell!

EPILOGUE: BE UNAPOLOGETICALLY YOU!

"Know thyself… the unexamined life is not worth living." ~ Socrates

In my journey through life, I have come to realise that too many people do not really live their own lives. They seek the validation of others; they try to please everyone around them. They think their worth is determined by how others perceive them; and, thereby, seek to shape themselves in accordance with norms and expectations that are not even their own. In doing that, they lose themselves, which I consider quite unfortunate. It is worth writing in bold red letters: You CANNOT please everyone! It is an impossible mission.

Sometimes, I wonder what the problem could be. Is it the problem of nature or nurture? Or, is it that, perhaps, such people do not even have any philosophy of life themselves? That they do not know what they want out of life or have failed to come to know themselves? They, therefore, become dumping grounds for others' philosophy and ideas. Do not be counted among such ones. If you are already numbered among the several in that category, this parting word is for you. Come closer. Lend me your ears.

It is pertinent to know what you are about. Do not be cowed by other people's expectations. Michel de Montaigne, one of the most significant French philosophers, put it best when he wrote: "There's wisdom in self-acceptance… The moment you stop seeking external validation, everything in your life begins to fall into place." The corollary to this fact is that you've got to let others be. Stop trying to control others. It is only then that you too reserve the right to be. If you're not hurting others by being you – be it in your thoughts, opinions, beliefs, ideas or attitudes – step out and be counted. Jettison that timidity. Be authentic. Your opinion counts. You matter. Just be you. And be unapologetic about it. Therein lies true freedom.

A couple of acquaintances have described me as being enigmatic. I don't know about that. For those who really know me, I think I can pass for, perhaps, one of the simplest persons to deal with. I go with my own convictions. I do not seek to control others, and I generally resist (sometimes vehemently) being pressured against my innermost convictions. You can be sure of one thing though: you will know where I stand on issues. My philosophy of life centres on skepticism, humanism, relativism and tolerance, out of which I value skepticism the most.

The skeptic in me makes me challenge dogmatism in all its ramifications. The universe is mind-boggling in complexity and size, and we

can only unravel a tiny bit of it at any point in time. That does not mean we should leave ourselves open to every charlatan that comes along.

I advocate a moderate approach to life. Be adaptable through the balancing of reason and emotion. Above all else:

- Be compassionate.
- Embrace friendship and intellectual curiosity.
- Explore knowledge.
- Be open minded.
- Be willing to change your mind when evidence contradicts your earlier stand.

Those are the values I have strived to live by, even if I'm not always successful in my attempts. I'm not perfect. Who is? My occasional failure in pursuing such virtues, notwithstanding, they remain values worth striving for, for therein lies the path to growth and personal fulfilment.

About the Author

Babatunde Aina, MFR, attended Ikeja Grammar School, the University of Ife (Now Obafemi Awolowo University), both in Nigeria, and the prestigious University of Queensland in Brisbane, Australia, where he bagged his Master of Governance and Public Policy (MGPP). He started his civil service career in 1989 as a Personnel Officer II and rose through the ranks to become Director (Administration) in January, 2019. His work experience covers arears such as Budgeting, Appointment, Staff Welfare & Training, Group Life Insurance Administration, as well as Planning & Policy Development. His numerous awards of recognition included a Presidential Award for Public Service Excellence in 2022, and the National Honours Award of Member of the Order of the Federal Republic, MFR (2023).

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Comments:

"A Universal Soul is a truly engaging read. Babatunde has masterfully written his life story with the narrative flair of a novel. The result is a book that is as difficult to put down as it is to forget — a rare feat for an autobiography… It is a story, I believe, for all of us." ~ Prof Adaramola

"[Tunde] is an avid story teller and teacher! Sometimes growing up, I wonder how he recounts events vividly to different people at different times… and all the narratives having the same level of details." ~ Leke Aina

"This is a compelling tale… compellingly told." ~ Dr Sussan Bailey